

THE SHIT IS DYING

The Shit is dying. He knows it as surely as he knows his credit is bad in all the drinking sinkholes of Soho (the ones that are left, that is: the Shit may be dying but he's outlived the Colony and Mabel's and Norman and Jeffrey and the rest). He can feel it in his guts, literally: a small hard lump like a china spider's egg, just waiting to hatch and send its deadly contents spiralling through him.

The Shit doesn't mind dying. He knows it will hurt, but having a crap hurts these days, inhaling hurts these days, drinking hurts these days – Christ, *washing* hurts these days. The Shit doesn't mind dying but he does mind pain. He's devoted his life to avoiding several kinds of pain - work, love, family, visiting friends who started dying before him – and he's anxious to avoid this one because it'll be so fucking boring. This pain will go on for a long time and surprise him in new, dull ways. Nothing will come of this pain but pain: it won't lend him money or toss him off or offer him a short-lived newspaper column. It will just hurt him and kill him.

The Shit gets up off the bed, brushes some cigarette ash into a whisky glass and goes to the window. He farts loudly – the Shit farts like a baron - and the windows rattle: not, sadly, because of him but because a large green – he wants to say “dust cart” but they're probably called “recycling wagonettes” or something nowadays is passing. For a moment, the Shit ponders opening the window and falling out onto the binbags below, but decides against it: it's hardly Shelley drowning in the Bay of Spezia and besides, the window hasn't opened since punk. The Shit enjoyed punk: all that sulphate, all those excited teenagers pretending to be bored, and all those people wanting to put him in their dreadful films because he told them he'd once fucked Warhol. Of course, he hasn't, he'd never even met him, but you could tell that lot anything. The Shit has spent a great deal of his life telling people anything. Landlords, landladies, club owners, girlfriends, boyfriends, lawyers: the Shit has lied to more people than he'd fucked, and that is saying a lot, because he'd lied to everyone he'd fucked and he'd fucked everyone he'd lied to (he knew that is impossible but that is just one more shit not to be given).

The Shit moves away from the window and steps on something sharp. He bends down, eventually, and picks it up: the crushed remains of his mobile phone. Touching the ancient object's body triggers a memory, as if the dead Nokia were somehow telepathic. The Shit can hear his own voice, and a woman's voice, and shouting, and tears. He drops the phone in an old raffia basket: memories are turds, best flushed.

The Shit, still unsettled, listens to the sounds of the house for a while. There is no noise from the room above his (“MODEL” it said on the door but Shirley isn't a model anything, she is real but ever since she'd read the Shit's palm they hasn't spoken) and there is no rattling of pipes, so the shower on the landing is free. Collecting his ratty towel and his toothpaste-caked sponge bag, the Shit left his room, looked left then right in case his landlady is about, then darted into the shower.

Standing under the jerking crocus that is the faulty shower head, the Shit contemplates a bout of onanism but decides against it, and braves a look at the lump under his skin. It is painless to the touch, which is either good or awful, and it doesn't move when he prods it. The Shit wonders if he should go to the doctor, but just thinking about it makes him tired. Instead he conjures up a mental image of a long-dead starlet from his youth and begins a lukewarm wank which he abandons when he realises the lump in his stomach is harder than his penis.

Towelled and safely back in his room, the Shit sniffs the clothes in his chest of drawers and dresses himself. He isn't planning to drink today because you've got to draw a line somewhere and also he is broke, so he puts on what he calls his not-drinking outfit, which is less stained than his drinking outfit, and marginally less flammable too. One look in the mirror – a kind of sudden head turn which enables him to see his reflection, but not too much, in case it gets frightening – tells him he is, if not good to go, then bearable to go. He grabs a handful of orphan cigarettes from the floor and heads out.

Soho is not what it used to be, thinks the Shit. It is - he searches for *le mot juste* – full of cunts these days. Cunts and food shops. When the Shit first arrived in London, the only food you could get in Soho is a late night Chinese, a newsagent's sandwich or, if you were desperate, a mouthful of cum. Now every single one of the Twelve Streets is dotted with artisanal cake shops, patisseries, restaurants and pop-up bars. And there is nowhere to get a drink. Admittedly, there are pubs, and bars, and even clubs but there are no what the Shit liked to call shitholes, places that open all night and close all day and that you can only get into if you know someone or they know you and even if it was them who named you the Shit in the first place, they'll let you in.

Nowadays Soho is just like everywhere else: what the Shit refers to as a kind of cramped Northampton of the soul (not that the Shit has never been to Northampton: he hasn't been north of Covent Garden since God knows when, at least not since he has fled his parents' house with his mother's savings down his trousers).

The Shit pauses outside the Groucho Club, before thinking better of it. Even the people he hasn't insulted in there are dead now, he decides, and walks on. The Coach is out of the question, the Spice he is barred from, and besides, he remembers, today is a non-drinking day. He pats the place where his wallet should be – for many years, the Shit has ended every meal with a friend by saying, "I'm terribly sorry, I appear to have come out without any intention of paying – and then sticks his hands into his pockets, where one or two coins bump against the dry crushed corpses of rogue cigarettes. There is enough for an espresso at Italia.

Sitting with his tiny drink at an outside table, ready to stare down any customer who might want to share, the Shit looks at the world going by. It can't go by fast enough, he decides, suppressing the urge to shout, "Fuck off and keep fucking off!" at innocent pedestrians. The Shit looks with disdain on tourists, day trippers, people with jobs and anyone, in fact, who is in Soho and isn't him. He makes allowances for tarts, junkies and theatricals, just as one would dolls in a dolls house or chess pieces on a board: they are the props of his life and he permits their existence.

But now, as life's rich parade made its way past the Shit's table, he becomes agitated. Here is some young fuckster with a Babylonian beard. Here is another with trousers at least a yard above his ankles. A girl with architect's glasses. A man whose trouser seat hangs between his knees as though he has shit himself. A woman in a hat. And so on. If the Shit has, by some fluke, been a suicide bomber, he would have happily completed his mission right there on the spot. What is wrong with these people? he thought. Were they dressed like this for a bet? Is there a fancy dress ball where people has to come as mental deficient? Has a clown school opened up nearby?

He sighs and accidentally downs his coffee in one go. There is a cough behind him and, turning, he sees a waitress with a cloth. She is Italian and she looks like the concept of

nonsense is alien to her, so the Shit gets up and leaves, first dropping a one cent Euro coin onto the table.

Moving through a crowd of tourists as a shark moves through plastic waste in the sea, the Shit ponders his next move. And then, with eyes accustomed to pavement flotsam, he sees it: a note. It's plastic, like everything these days, but it's money, and the swift slide of a shoe holds it in place until the Shit can bend down far enough to pick it up.

"Fuck my old boots," says the Shit to no-one in particular, "A monkey."

The Shit cannot actually remember how much a monkey is – although, by a strange coincidence, he did once buy a monkey – but it doesn't matter: the thing in his yellow fingers is, somehow and amazingly, a fifty pound note.

The Shit gets up before some poor holiday fool can lay claim to this bounty, and fucks off to the French.

"All the whiskies," he tells the barman, "And an orange juice for yourself."

The barman is twenty but this is the French and he is used to this sort of thing. He lines up a selection of large ones and the Shit works his way through them.

"Cheers," says the barman, raising his juice.

"Fuck off," the Shit replies amiably, and signals for more drinks.

Half an hour later, the Shit is walking amid the cars and taxis of Old Compton Street like a farmer surrounded by his cattle. If a car honks at him, he strikes it with the flat of his hand and if it jerks to a sudden halt, he salutes it with the collapsing kebab he has somehow acquired between Old Compton and the French. He makes his way like a pissed arrow up Frith and past Greek to the Square, in which he kicks his way past the pigeons to sit under the scarred and pitted statue at its entrance. Soon he is asleep, his lap full of sliced onions and tomatoes from the kebab like a garland.

And, for the first time in months, the Shit dreams.

He dreams about his father, who did everything with his fists.

He dreams about his mother, who loved the movies.

And he dreams about a phone call he made.

In the dream, the Shit is on the phone but the phone won't stop ringing. The phone won't stop ringing and it won't stop crying, and it won't stop crying because it isn't a phone but a baby. The baby won't stop crying and nor will the Shit, so he slams the phone to the ground and –

The Shit wakes up, his crotch heavy with grease. The phone is still ringing. He looks around to see a cycle courier curse as he struggles to remove his mobile from his Lycra pants. The Shit exhales: it's the same ring tone as his phone is all, not old but only ironic. The Shit gets up, dusts the fruits of far Ottoman from his groin, and makes his rusty way back through Soho. The phone call, real or dreamt, has unsettled him, and perhaps a lie down is called for. His stomach hurts, sharply as though the spider's egg has burst, and he feels the need to piss. Looking round for something to urinate behind – a tree, perhaps, or a tourist – the Shit feels suddenly warm in his nethers and realises the moment has passed.

The Shit begins, to his surprise, to cry. He is not the crying type, as far as he is aware, and remained dry-eyed at the news of both his parents' deaths and the receipt of the letter

from his wife which detailed the ways in which he would never see his daughter again. But here he is, stained and tearful outside the Hussar – not the Hussar any more, his inner pedant tells him – and crying like a huge red baby.

A drink seems the best option, but the Shit's money has gone. He can't remember if he spent it or lost it or just gave it to a tramp, but either way it's not there anymore. Fortunately, his front door key still is still in his pocket, so he takes that as an omen and heads back to his flat. On the way he has to stop several times as the tiny spiders inside his guts are nipping away at him: he leans against walls, holds onto bins and at one point puts his arms round a pillar box as though it were a dance partner.

Finally, the Shit makes it to his front door and gets inside. Making his way upstairs, he is greeted by his landlady.

"Monday," he tells her in lieu of a greeting, but she ignores him and instead nods at his open door.

The Shit frowns and goes into his room. A woman is sitting on his bed, not young but not old either. She has his post, such as it is, and she has his chin.

"Dad," she says.

"Don't want any today, thank you," the Shit replied, taking the post from her so as to keep his hands from shaking.

"You rang off," the woman says. "You were telling me that you were ill and then you started -"

Her face is balanced between manners and truth, but the Shit remembers now. He remembers crying – but he never cries – and he remembers throwing the phone down and grinding it like a vial under foot.

"I need you to come with me," says the woman. "You need proper medical attention."

"Sarah," he begins.

"Sarah," he says, beginning.

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