

HOAST by Shane Strachan

Wednesday 1st April 2020

Oh, ye canna shove yer granny aff a bus. Unless it's yer daddy's mammy. Then push push.

I've been stuck wi ma Grunny for a wik noo and she's aaready gien ma a curn o reasons tae shove her aff a double decker at high speed.

It's ma Da's fault really. Een minute I wis aul enough tae bide at hame and look aifter masel while he wis swannin aboot Asia on a cruise wi his blonde, but add in a global pandemic, a grunny up tae high doh ower being stuck in her hoose alone and a wee incident in ma kitchen involvin the microwave explodin aifter I tried tae cook a tattie in tinfoil, I wis suddenly ower young and ower glaikit tae be left masel for as lang as Da wis stuck aff the coast o Phuket on a ship full o feverish octogenarians.

So there wis me, aboard the number 69 bus fae the Broch tae St Combs tae bide wi Grunny in her wee sheltered hoose nearhand the village school. Grunny's hoose is a shed o a place, really. Ye come in the front door straight intae her cupboard o a kitchen, then ben in the lobby there's doors tae her wee box bedroom, her eternally caul lavvie, the lobby press (a biyler, a pile o toowels and some face cloots), and finally a livin room that ye could jist aboot park a postie's van in.

While Grunny disna hae a spare room, she has a spare single mattress laid oot on the livin room fleer for ma. There's a story... A couple o year ago, she won twa thoosan pound at the bingo. The next day a mannie wis chappin on her door tellin her aa about this dream mattress she jist hid tae buy. Well, nae sooner wis the Mecca money in her accoont, it wis fleein back oot the bank tae the mattress mannie. Ma Da wis sure that crook had picked it oot o some skip somewye. It disna exactly smell like it's been used afore, but it sure as hell feels like it has – the coils dig intae ma back at funny angles every time I pit ma heid doon tae sleep.

Grunny is 84 and she's aathing ye'd expect o a stereotypical grunny at that age. Blue rinse. Glaisses that tik up half her face. Falsers that sometimes faa oot fan she sups at her daily broth. That's right. Daily. For the majority o the near 31,000 days she's been on this planet, she's biyilt an egg for brakfist, had broth for denner and had fish in some shape or form every supper. By day three at her hoose, I'd wis aaready sickent wi it, especially the fish, which is usually smoked haddock poached in milk. Boke.

Bit fish is foo yer folk made a livin up until yer faither took tae the rigs. Ye'll ay be a Quitie, mind.

Fit's a Quitie?

Weel, it's summin tae dee wi birds fit wye we got the nickname. Coots I think... Or wis it summin tae dee wi kilts..?

Kilts?

Aye. The folk here lang ago were fairmer fishermen, and they'd weer kilts file they sowed their seeds on their land and cast nets oot in their boaties.

Grunny made stuff up. I wis sure o it. She definitely made up words. I'd never heard onybody say half o fit she came oot wi. I think she wis pullin ma leg maist o the time she opent her moo.

Oh ye'r the marris o yer Da, she'd say at least three times a day.

Translation: I really resembled ma Da. I wish I didna. I'd raither have looked like ma Mam, even if she wis a wifie, god rest her soul. At least she wis bonnie fae the photas I hae o her afore the accident took her awa.

Ye'v on marless sheen, Grunny said een day aifter I'd nipped oot tae tak the wheelie bin in fae the kirb.

Marless means mismatched apparently.

Marris, the same. Marless, the opposite. There seemed tae be some kinda logic tae it. But I think that wis aa part o Grunny's bluff. I asked her if she made up words.

That's fit I thought ma grunny did and-aa. She used tae say knife like 'k-nife'. Nae word o a lee. Oh look... Grunny could see her neighbour oot the winda. Moira's fair pittin on the wicht in this lockdown. Ee me! She must be thinkin I've a bidie-in, ye'r aas grown up since ye last cam oot tae see ma.

Bidie-in... I wis so affrontit that she wis insinuatoin she wis some kinda cougar and me her toyboy, that I got oot ma Nintendo Switch, plugged in ma earphones and pretendit nae tae hear her the rest o the day.

Ye'r een'll turn square! She shouts every time I switch ma games on. This is rich comin fae the wifie that sits twa metres awa fae her TV eight hours a day and only taks her een aff it tae keek doon at her knittin every noo and then.

Worst of aa, her TV is in black and white. Grunny disna want tae pey mair for a colour TV licence. Grunny is ticht-fisted, a description I learnt fae her this wik fan she wis slaggin aff ma Da's blonde. Apparently Christmas presents fae ma Da have really gone doonhill since Yvonne came on the go.

Aa his money gings on them cruises they're ay on. Weel look at them noo. The Guid Man Upstairs has sent a plague tae teach them a lesson.

Grunny, if there's a god, I seriously doot they've put the world in lockdown because ma Da's treated Yvonne tae a cruise.

Dinna question the Guid Man's wyes.

Every time I dee onything remotely oot o line, I'm reminded about *the Guid Man Upstairs*.

Ye dinna even hae a laft Grunny, never mind an upstairs.

Grunny rates a Bible. If she's nae awa tae the Bingo, she's in a kirk at *the meeting*. A couple o days ago I wis chiky and joked that it wis AA meetings she wis probably missin oot on noo that she wis stuck inside. That did NOT go doon weel.

Heh min! ma faither smoked like a lum and drunk like a fish, and by Jove, neether a fag nor a drap o alcohol has ever past ma lips. I did ma best tae nae end up a sotter like him. Ye hear ma?

Aye, Grunny. Sorry.

Och... Ye'r a guid loon really, aren't ye?

She started tellin ma aa about her dad, but fell asleep aboot five minutes in. So I set aff oot on ma daily walk up alang High Street ontae Seaview and then doon tae the shorie. There's nithin else tae dee in St Combs right noo. I only ever liked visitin here for ice cream fan I wis wee, and of course, the ice cream shoppie's shut like aathing else. So everyday I heid tae the shorie tae waatch the waves foam and fizz tae pass the time.

Grunny's got nae WiFi, so I've set a daily limit on ma phone data so I dinna use it aa up in one go. Problem is, I use up the daily limit by dennertime every day. Jist in time for broth. Gads! So I only hae ma Nintendo, the sea, and noo this diary tae keep ma occupied.

It wisna so bad fan I wis thinkin I'd be gettin back tae ma hoose the day. That was the original plan given Da got hame fae Thailand on an emergency flight this mornin. But no. Summin happent yesterday – Grunny woke up wi a fever and a hoast.

No Jamie, ye'll hae tae self-isolate wi Grunny for the next fortnicht noo. Yvonne and I didna manage tae dodge that virus on the Princess of the Seas for twa wiks jist tae come hame and catch it aff o you.

Yvonne and I... Fa does ma Da think he is?

So that wis me. Scuppert and scunnert for the next fortnight, aa thanks tae some kinda lung jandies aff a bat, and a tattie wrapped in tinfoil.

Saturday 4th April

Although her fever seems tae weer aff noo and then, Grunny's hoast has got worse – through the night she soonds like a seal barkin. I can hear her through the paper thin waas and so the cough keeps baith o us up half the night.

Hooever, she still managed tae raise her vyce enough tae gie ma a row for pittin ma trainers doon on her kitchen table this mornin while I wis hooverin the fleer.

That's bad luck... Have wi nae enough adee wi me haein Corvid eichteen... We'r nae needin mair trouble!

Grunny is SERIOUSLY superstitious.

Every mornin, she gets oot o bed on the right-hand side without fail.

She pits a silver penny in newborn babies' prams. 50p if she likes the mam. 20p if she disna.

On the first o May, she rubs dew aff the grass on her face. I widna if I wis her, given half the dogs let loose by her neighbours on her gairden.

On Thursday, I came intae the livin room weerin a green t-shirt and she telt ma the sight o ma made her feel orra and tae go get changed intae a different colour.

On Friday, I spilt some saat on the table during broth-time and she made ma chuck some grains ower ma left shooder *intae the face o the deil*.

She claims her hoover cuts oot every time she gings near the photo o ma Dydie in the livin room. It did fan I hoovered near it as well, but then I realised that I stretched the cord so much, the plug had come lowse fae the lobby socket and lost power. Grunny has probably been deein the same aa these years...

Sunday 5th April

Govie dicks! Fit a fleg tae gie ma! I... Granny says afore catchin her raspy breath... I thought a robber hid brukken intae ma hoose! Fit on earth have ye deen tae yer heid?

Last Christmas, ma Da gave ma a stubble trimmer tae deal wi the patchy bum fluff across ma jaa. This morning, I decided tae dee summin aboot the jungle o hair on tap o ma heid. I thought I could gie masel a fade and then a cool line like fit Ronaldo sometimes his. Turns oot aa I could achieve wis summin akin tae fit a cat looks like aifter it's hid multiple operations at the vet. The hale lot had tae go – I didna choose the Thug Life, the Thug Life chose me.

Tae mak up for scaring ma Grunny, I let her borrow ma phone and use up some o ma data so she could waatch the live stream o the kirk service. It wis a pretty dour affair wi the meenister up in his wooden poupit, yakkin on aboot the Plagues o Egypt: Bleed. Puddocks. Lice. Flees. Summin that soondit a bit like Mad Coo Disease. Plook. Thunnerstorms. Locusts. Darkness. Firstborn loons drappin doon deid... And we

thought we hid it bad wi the Coronavirus. This kirk service wis dreich tae say the least, but Grunny wis fair pleased tae hum awa tae the hymns.

I stupidly made the mistake o tellin ma pals that I widna be able tae get back tae them for a wee while since Grunny needed tae waatch something on ma phone, and afore the kirk service wis up, the Whatsapp notifications were appearin at the tap o ma screen.

WHATSAPP

Steven

Jamie's granny is tidy

Press for more

WHATSAPP

Davie

Ha! Steven's yer new granda

Press for more

WHATSAPP

Steven

Nah, she's moved on to Ollie noo.

Press for more

Reader, they got far worse.

I panicked. I wisna sure if Grunny's een were good enough tae read the message previews, but I heided ben intae the lavvie and pulled the reid cord in the toilet. Immediately there wis a beepin noise and then Grunny's hoose phone started ringing.

Jamie, fit did I tell ye aboot them cords. The fite een is the licht. The reid een's the alarm!

Sorry Grunny, I said. I ran back through and picked ma mobile up aff her armrest and switched aff ma Whatsapp notifications as she yapped awa tae the sheltered hoosin warden on the hoose phone. She said she wis still jist aboot alive, but her grandson would be gettin murdert aifter she hung up the phone.

Monday 6th April

Day twelve in Grunny Buchan's hoose.

Grunny's hoast has gotten worse. She can barely stan up withoot runnin oot o breath so I took a seat through tae her bedroom and sat wi her as she flicked through her phota albums. Maist o it wis photas o her and ma Dydie (R.I.P.) on their holidays tae Majorca, the Algarve, Amsterdam and Jerusalem. It's weird hoo Grunny looks so young, but still so aul-fashioned in the pictures. I dinna say that tae her though. She's ay sayin her pals are aul-farrant and frumpy. Nae her though. She's a supermodel in her eyes, the wye she spiks.

Grunny's been a lot mair places than I realised. She's had a good life, but I dinna think it's her time yet. Please God, nae yet. I dinna ken fit exactly I'm supposed tae dee if she pops her clogs, and it's nae like I'm gan tae ask her, is it?

Wednesday 8th April

Grunny's hoast is still nae shiftin and her fever seems tae be gettin worse. Her face is bright reid like she's got a massive beamer. I finally got her tae bide on the phone tae NHS 111 – she said she couldna be bathered wytin in the queue yesterday aifter only being on hold for a mintie. The GP she got through tae the day telt her that since she wis managin tae spik, she would mair than likely be fine and recover. Bit afore they hung up, she telt Grunny tae mak sure that I rang for an ambulance if she ended up wi *real* difficulty breathin.

Fit's real and fit's nae nooadays? I'm aa raivelled wi this Sharonavirus, she rasps.

Ma phone data has completely run oot. I'm so fed up being stuck inside aa day. Honestly, fit did folk dee wi themsels in the Victorian times afore the internet wis invented?

Friday 10th April

Grunny's been horizontal for aboot a day solid. She can barely lift her heid up aff her pilla. She's still managin tae breathe okay, and naething on god's earth will ever stop the woman spikkin, but I'm really worried noo. I've tried phonin ma Da tae ask him fit I should dee, but aa he ever says is, *She'll be fine. She jist has tae wyte it oot.*

Easy for him tae say fan he's nae here lookin aifter her day in day oot. I took a picture o her tae send tae him, but ma phone wisna on silent and Grunny heard the click.

You dare send a picter o ma like... like this tae onybody... and it'll be your funeral afore mine.

We baith couldna get tae sleep fan we went tae oor beds – Grunny couldna stop hoastin and I wis full o unused energy fae being stuck inside for days on end.

Fan midnight came, I finally went intae a new month o ma phone's data allowance. I went ben tae Grunny's bedroom and asked her if she'd like tae listen tae some o her hymns on YouTube.

She nodded her heid a little, so I picked a playlist at random and held the phone oot in front o us. The first song started playing.

*Why should I feel discouraged?
Why should the shadows come?
Why should my heart feel lonely,
and long for heaven and home?*

*When Jesus is my portion,
a constant friend is He.
His eye is on the sparrow,
and I know He watches over me.
His eye is on the sparrow
and I know He watches me.*

Wi her falsers in a glaiss o water by her bedside, Grunny gave a wee gummy smile as she waatched the retro-font lyrics slide up the screen. Noo and then she'd try tae hum along, but she wis unable tae hit the high notes. Anither sang came on. This een featured video footage o somebody travellin aboot raither than the lyrics. There wis lots o landscapes and hills, and then this ancient buildin that looked a bit like a kirk and that wis aa bonnie and sandy-coloured. Grunny made ma pass her falsers ower so she could pit them in tae spik.

Ee me, that's Jerusalem. That's... That's aa the places I gid wi yer Dydie fan we went...

She bid quiet the rest o the video, but fan the next een came on, she burst intae tears.

I looked closely at the video, but I didna ken fit had upset her. It wis jist a wifie singin Amazing Grace while she stood in front o some bible passage up on the waa ahin her. I read through the passage while Grunny kept greetin.

Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.

Finally Grunny managed tae catch her breath enough tae spik.

That's fit ma faither ay used tae say fan I wis a bairn... This is a sign... ma time's up...

Dinna say that Grunny. Ye'r jist readin ower muckle intae things, I replied, but a shiver ran doon ma back.

I've never telt ye... aboot fan you wis wee... Fit happent the day o the crash...

It taks her a while tae get the words oot, swite poorin doon her face, but Grunny manages tae tell her story.

Een day yer mam had come in past wi yer Nana... tae drap something aff tae ma afore they went intae toon tae the shops... They'd come roon intae ma backie for a yap so I could see ye... Ye were aa bonnie dressed in a gansey I'd knitted file ye slept awa in yer babyseat oot the car...Jist as they were leavin, ye woke up and started girnin... And oot o naewye... doon flew a wee sparra that landed on the tap o the hood o yer babyseat... It bid ere, even though ye were ballin at the tap o yer wee lungs. And I wis feart at the sicht o thon birdie... I wis sure as onything it wis a sign... I says tae yer mither, He's bidin wi me this aifterneen...

Mamam didna get fit wye ma Grunny wis being so thraan aboot it, but in the end she said it wis nae problem if that's fit ma Grunny wanted, then aff ma mam and Nana went tae the shops. The accident happent later that day and we never saa them again.

Anither shiver ran doon ma spine.

I dinna think I'll sleep a wink the night.

Sunday 12th April

Grunny is risen.

Afore I even ken masel, she's up and in the kitchen bylin the last two eggs in the hoose for oor brakfist.

Grunny... ye'r...

Still gan, aye. I'm still gan yet, she says afore flashin a big false-toothed smile.

Monday 13th April

Oor 14 days o self-isolation are up aifter the day. Ma Da's comin tae pick ma up the morn's mornin and then I'll be back hame tae ma double bed, fibre WiFi and three meals a day that disna consist o eggs, broth or fish.

Grunny's breathing is still a little raspy, but her fever has completely gone and her appetite's fully back. She's back tae sittin in front o the TV aa day, her een flittin atween the black and white screen and her knittin, wi a wee nap every noo and then.

The night, we had The Last Fish Supper. This time she treated us by makin a batter and fryin the fish and the chips. It wis way better than onything I've ever had oot the chipper. Grunny wis a bittie peeved that I clarted the fish in tamata saas, but that's the wye I like it.

Och, I'll miss ye ma loon. It's been fine tae hae the company. I dinna like tae say tae yer faither, but days can pass by far I hivna seen a soul and weel... it's hard tae thole sometimes.

I'll miss you as weel Grunny.

Tuesday 14th April

This morning, somebody chapped hard on the front door. Grunny came ben intae the livin room afore I had a chance tae even sit up on ma mattress.

That's yer Da here for ye. Ye better get a move on or he'll be at ye for being latchie. She looked sad-kind as she said it, her een cast doon at the floral carpet.

I put ma hand up tae ma moo and coughed hard.

Ee me. Ye've a hoast!

I coughed hard again.

Och... Fit are we tae dee?

Cough.

Grunny ran back ben the hoose. I heard the letterbox flap open fae the inside.

Jamie's a hoast. Fit will we dee?

Ma Da's words were too muffled for ma tae hear.

Okay then. Ching ching.

Ma Grunny came back through.

Weel, I'm affa sorry ma loon, but ye'r stuck wi me anither wik. Yer Da winna hae ye back at his.

Okay, I say. I lie back doon and pull ma sheets up tae ma chin.

Are ye for brakfist? Fit ye aifter?

A biylt egg, please.

Aarite ma loon. One biylt egg comin up, Grunny says afore she heids back oot the room wi a spring in her step.