

Rising Laughter

He's snoring again. It's worse since they changed his medication. I can't sleep and I can hear the neighbours talking in bed, through the wall. I can't hear the exact words, only the pattern. It undulates fast and slow, and ends with a pause when she laughs. It gets louder and he joins in. They'll wet themselves if they keep laughing like that. I get up and go to the kitchen and I can't help smiling at the strange sound of their infectious laughter .

It's been ages since Roy left the flat to brave the world, and even longer since we had a laugh. He's lost somewhere in his body, helpless in a dark place, just like his Dad. But I don't want to give up trying. Those bloody pills aren't the answer.

He took me dancing when I was sixteen, and I couldn't see any sign of it. He'd laugh like anyone else, chortle and shake, become possessed as good as anyone. He could tell a good story that's one of the things that attracted me to him. I'd watch him pace himself, embroider the plot, revel in the tale, then deliver the punch line. He'd glow and smile. I was proud of him.

They're still chuckling next door, like their teeth are scratching the wallpaper taunting me. They can't leave it alone. I hear the door, he's off to work . There's a snigger through the kitchen window as he walks along the balcony. It must have been a good one.

I take Roy his breakfast. He doesn't say anything, just sits there po-faced as I pull the curtains to let the grey light in. I leave him staring into space. I could never tell jokes – too embarrassing, I'd forget the story and

start giggling, turn bright red, and look for a hole to crawl into. I like most jokes, but there's a lot I don't understand. It's not that I don't understand the joke but I don't see what's funny. Sometimes they're just hurtful, like racist jokes or nasty ones about sexual perversion. But a good joke's like a piece of timeless magic. I can't remember jokes but I know exactly where it was I heard them, the colour of the wallpaper, a mole on the face of the person who told it, the way someone fell about laughing, gasping for air.

I wash up the breakfast things and water the daffodil bulbs on the windowsill.

The next night I'm out on the balcony having a cigarette. He won't let me smoke in the flat, not since the doctor made him give up. Three flats along I can hear them laughing, they're in hysterics. It's like a virus is breaking out. They close their window to muffle the laughter. I smile and nearly drop my ciggie down four floors, but I'm curious. What can be so funny?

I go in and sneak into bed beside him, he grunts and rolls over away from me. When we first met, I couldn't wait to sleep with him, to share his bed. I would have given anything, and it was worth it. He was a good lover, passionate and thoughtful. But, now it doesn't take much for me to creep out and curl up on the settee with some old film on the telly. He doesn't like me doing it, he likes me there, right next to him breathing the same air.

I've seen this film before, it's a western. When I turn it off I can hear chuckling in the distance, making its way along the corridors and down the stairwells, like bad plumbing. Or am I just imagining it? I can't tell but I fall asleep listening out for more. I'm a child again and Dad is telling me a story,

it's sending me to sleep, safe and secure. I sleep for what seems a year, or was it five minutes? Soft laughter from somewhere in the block wakes me.

I get up, dress and go out to fetch his prescription. I bump into the next door neighbour, Joyce on the staircase. We exchange greetings, and I pluck up the courage to ask her.

'You were having a good laugh the other night.'

'Don't,' Joyce says slapping my arm, her eyes rolling behind the peroxide fringe. 'Bert came back from work with a cracker, best joke I've heard in years.' I raise my eyebrows in expectation, and she takes a breath. She describes the situation richly, one I can identify with, as most people would. Years fall off her as she acts the part. She looks me in the eye and assures me, describing the scene, building a picture, a place with warm people. I nod in encouragement, fully understanding the character's predicament. She balances carefully on the metal stairs, nail varnish against galvanized steel. I concentrate hard in case I get the wrong end of the stick, listening for anything significant, something that might be twisted, turned round and used in the punchline. She gets closer, her breath is rancid, her eyes wide open. She pauses, then slowly lets the final words leave her yellowing teeth and smudged lipstick. She pushes me away, hard against the handrail laughing at her own joke. I laugh, slowly at first, enjoying the intimacy, our bodies sliding out of control. My stomach muscles complain at this new exercise and tears start to roll down my face. She looks worried, but then she's laughing at my contortions. We are rag dolls hanging on the balcony, falling into each other. Gradually we gain air and inflate, our spines become stiff.

'Mind you, I don't tell it as well as Bert,' she says.

I light a ciggie and offer her one. She lights it off mine, and then asks.

'What about you, have you got one?'

I wipe my eyes and shake my head. She takes a drag off the ciggie then scuttles off like a disappointed dealer. I quickly memorise the joke's form and punch line, thinking about its pace and content.

My father was a traveling salesman and kept a joke book. He said you have to sell yourself and the product follows. If they like you, they'll like the goods, and everyone likes a joke, so that was his way in. His joke book had all his clients entered alphabetically, with their preferences next to their name. Like (sh) for shit jokes more popular up north, (m-i-l) for mother in law jokes - widely popular, (sex) jokes - very popular in the midlands. There was even (ESI) an Englishman, Scotsman and Irishman category, as well as many more. In the different sections the punch line would be written carefully in his tiny handwriting. Before calling on a client he would quickly sift the book and choose a joke to smooth the sale. He carried the book for twenty two years, and then on his last week of work, he left it in a telephone box in Brighton. Its cracked black leather next to the calling cards of Rita the meter maid and Simone of S&M delights.

That's all I wanted when he died, his joke book, to remember those funny nights by the fire when he would have us in stitches. Roy would copy him and steal some of his jokes. I didn't mind, I thought it was flattery and Roy told them well. But, I never dared tell jokes at home, that was what Dad did, and I wouldn't have dreamt of treading on his toes.

I put Roy's medication in the cupboard and make the tea. I wish he wouldn't watch so much day-time television, especially the news. It just makes him worse. The middle east and the starving in Africa, what can he possibly do about them?

Again that night I hear laughter rippling though the block, at first it's the mechanical laughter of the TV, alongside hi fis and barking dogs. But later it's more eccentric, people gasping for air while Roy's fast asleep snoring. I make some hot chocolate then go to the bathroom. I look in the mirror, and I swear if I look hard enough I can still see the girl that wooed Roy, she's still there hiding behind the wrinkles and chins.

I tease her out with some silly facial expressions. She is smiling at me. I remember the first lines of the joke, and say them quietly, keeping a straight face, with just a faint glint in my eye. I recall the gestures, the drama, as the joke unfolds towards the twist, and the pause. She is looking expectantly through the cracked mirror, I take a breath and deliver the punch line with immaculate timing. She laughs with me. I stifle the laughs. I must not wake him. I put on some make up and lipstick, a dress rehearsal. She looks happy, we are one, confident and charming. I tell the joke again with aplomb, celebrating under the 40 watt bulb and half tiled wall. Two years I've been decorating the bathroom, but the Tesco job doesn't leave me much time.

After I've made his breakfast I go outside for a ciggie to find courage. I'm on late shift today. Bert from next door rushes by late for work. I wash up first then take him tea by the telly. I tidy the room and disconnect the digital box, but he doesn't notice for a while, then I switch the dam thing off. I place a

chair directly in front of him, he looks puzzled. I smooth the folds from my dress and push back my hair.

I just begin, I don't announce it or give a rambling introduction. His face is the colour of pale cardboard but I can see a glint somewhere in those valium eyes. I'm enjoying it. He is curious, like watching a documentary on the history channel he can't understand. I'm very slow and deliberate, making sure he follows the important parts that may be destroyed and turned over with the twist. I stand up, more room for gesture and expression. He is impressed but not overcome. I catch a glimpse of Roy at twenty-four, carrying three pints from the bar with a fag in the corner of his mouth. There are tiny red lines in his cardboard face moving blood from that heart I love. I'm gaining, I know what's coming but I mustn't laugh. I pause, then like a full kiss on his dry lips, I deliver the punch line. I chuckle a bit, but not enough to steal the response. I stare into a young Roy's eyes and very slowly they sparkle like a distant shooting star. His face lifts and the corner of his lips turn up. His hands let go of the tarnished armchair and he shakes his head slowly, in disbelief. Then a sound like a depth charge rumbles through his stomach, up his throat and delivers a small but perfect chuckle. He turns to me, with a smile, as his grey face starts to redden.

'You told it well, love. Just like your old man.'

Later that week, as we're walking down the stairs, we pause to let Joyce by. She greets Roy as if she'd seen him yesterday, then winks at me, raising her nail bitten thumb. She carries on up the stairs, and Roy turns and calls to her, 'we're off to feed the ducks.'