

Choosing

Since it happened, I don't get around so much, at least not alone, not as I did when I was young and free and everything seemed possible. At least I can still get to Writers' Circus meetings. And I can still tap out my stories on you, Larry the Laptop, my old trusty friend.

Doris, she's next door but one, said I should choose just one thing, the thing I love the most. Well, I'll try of course, but I really don't think I can do it, not without your help, dear one.

What? You're on my dull side.

Thanks, that's better. A list? Like a bucket list? Then choose? Okey-dokey.

Let me think.

When I was five, for my birthday I got my cousin's red two-wheeler. He got a bigger one even though it wasn't his birthday because his mum and dad had good jobs and lived in a nice top floor flat with a record player. Years later my uncle gave me a Snuzzle Durante LP. I loved the songs and the speaking style of his singing. My dad used to say Jimmy Durante was a true showman. Do you remember *Sleepless in Seattle*, with him singing *Make Someone Happy* and *As Time Goes By*? Best film ever, maybe that's what I should choose? Do you remember the bit where she's drivin' . . .

What?

Okey-dokey.

Well, when I was eleven, my cousin was riding his bike, not the first one, another one, brand new, a Sun Supalite. He was run over by a bread van and lost his ear. I think it was his right one. They gave him a new ear, plastic, with a stud clip which annoyed him and he hardly wore it. It looked really good and I asked him for it but my aunt said no, I had to give it back. I wish I still had it, it was brilliant. I used to think, if I had that ear I could stick it to my forehead and go to a Trekkie Conv. . .

What?

Okey-dokey.

Well, that bike, the Sun Supalite, it was fixed up by the insurance people and I got it for my tenth birthday. Really, it was too big for me at the time but I loved it. I used to clean it and oil it almost every day. It had five gears and really good brakes, and a pouch with tools and patches to mend punctures and a water bottle. One day a big boy punched me and took my bike but we knew where he stayed and my dad got it back. His

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name was Thomas McVittie and everyone called him The Penguin because he had splay feet. When he was older he ended up in prison in London for armed robbery. I used to ride that bike to work every day at Stevie's shipyard at Linthouse. I had it in the garage until I was nearly fifty. I don't remember where it went. I think it . . .'

What?

Okey-dokey.

Can I just add, it was NOT Supalite. It weighed a bloody ton!

Well, I suppose the next thing must be Finlay Lang's dad's fishing rod. I was fourteen and he was two years older than me, an apprentice welder in Stevie's. I was in awe of him, he could talk to girls, make them laugh, then wink at me, my sign to scarper. Later he would tell me his tales of conquest, everything, saying he got them to go all they way. There was one girl, Frances, with huge great . . .

What?

Okey-dokey.

Well, after work Finlay took me with him to the Gorbals Waterworks to catch trout. We walked all the way from Arden. No, it was Finlay who fished, I just soaked up everything he said and watched. Then one time, it was September, already dark, he was casting blind. We could hear fish splashing, the evening rise. They were gobbling insects from the surface, he said. Finlay said it was the best time to fish, 'the evening rise'. He already had five then he caught another one. As it struggled he handed me the rod and I reeled it in. My first ever trout. I was so pleased. Maybe that was my best thing ever?

Well, on our way home we had to sneak past a farm. We got a bit lost. A dog started barking at us, somewhere near. Finlay said the farmer would shoot at us, claiming he was after rabbits. We were scared, at least I was. We started to run. A small dry-stane dyke loomed ahead and side by side we hurdled it to get into the next field. On our side the wall was low but on the other side there was a high drop and below there was a flock of sheep huddled for the night. We landed on top of them and they scattered bleating and baa-ing, scaring us witless. Finlay's dad's fishing rod got cracked but that came out later. Finlay had to buy him a new one, from his wages. Finlay's dad had a greyhound he used to enter for races, as a ringer. His brother was a bookie. It was called the Prince of Arabee and it had . . .

What?

Okey-dokey.

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EXCUSE ME, MR BEE, IT'S TIME TO CHANGING YOU NAPPY PAD. GIVE YOU A NICE FRESHEN UP. LET ME TAKE YOUR LAPTOP AND . . .

No, please, Shireen, could you please do someone else first I need to. . . No, Shireen, wait, please. . .

RIGHT, MR BEE, THAT'S YOU ALL SORTED TILL TAMORROW MORNIN. HERE'S YOU LARRY, ALL SAFE AND SOUND FOR YOU. NOW, REMEMBER, NO MORE TALKIN TO YOURSELF. YOU KNOW MRS BEE ISN'T NEVER COMING BACK NO MORE AND TALKIN TO HER JUST MAKES YOU WEEPY. NIGHT, NIGHT NOW, LIGHTS OUT.

But Shireen, it's only twenty-past six. Surely . . .

What?

Just whisper?

Okey-dokey.

Well, I suppose the next best thing was graduating from Strathclyde. When I went to work at Stevie's as an apprentice plumber I never dreamed of even trying for O levels; I think they were called Lowers back then. Oh, one time, before Stevie's, when I was at Glasgow College of Building on a pre-apprenticeship course, we were doing bricklaying and plastering in an old church in George Street. Much, much later I realised I had been right across from the Royal College. But to me back then it was just a huge red sandstone building full of posh students wearing long scarves. I was fifteen, so it was 1962. One day I saw this girl who was wearing beads in her hair and the shortest mini-skirt I've ever seen. She had really nice legs and quite a nice round ar . . .

What?

No, not nearly as nice as yours, dear one.

Anyway, she was walking in front of me. I speeded up to get a better look at her nice backside. She was fiddling in her shoulder bag. I was right behind her, dreaming naughty thoughts. Something, maybe it was a make-up bag fell out and she stopped without warning. I bumped into her, and reached out my hands to stop myself from falling over her. When I stumbled back upright, my hands somehow cupped her breasts, from behind, by accident. She stood up and twisted round and our faces were inches apart. We smiled at each other. She leaned forward and kissed me then twirled like a ballet dancer and ran up the steps through the big doors into the Royal College. I never saw her again.

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Every time I pass the entrance I think of her and wonder if she every thought of, well, you know . . .

What?

No, of course she wasn't as pretty as you, dear one! No, no, not at all. In fact, I seem to remember the poor girl had a skelly eye and a huge nose. But, hey, she did look great from behind.

What?

Yes, of course I'm sure. And she had a big wart in the middle of her right eyebr....

What?

Was it her left eyebrow? Let me think.

No, definitely her right eyebrow.

What?

Of course, I love you best, but you're not a **THING**, my dear one, are you?

Well, maybe I should choose my first car, a Triumph Herald. Was its number **KGA 195**? Even though it had squealy brakes I still loved it. Did I ever tell you I got it from the car auction? It was a pale-yellow colour and my flat mate Andy from Cresswell Street taught me to drive. Do you remember it, dear one? Do you remember I used to drive it even though I only had a provisional? That first night I ran you home from the party where we met and you left your gloves in it? But I knew your name and where you lived and so I looked you up in the phone book and, well, the rest is history. Then I got the wee grey Mini with the white roof and the tiny wee steering wheel and fancy exhaust. Maybe that's the thing I loved best, the Mini. Do you remember. . .

What?

Well, no I don't regret selling it to buy your engagement ring. Of course, it was worth it. But still, it was a great wee car, wasn't it? Do you remember when we drove to. . .

What?

The boys?

Mmmm, ye-es, becoming a new dad. . . But, really, I . . .

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What?

Yes, yes, of course it was the best time of my life. But it says the story must be about a THING! A child is not a thing, is it? And Fleck doesn't count either, does he? A dog like that, even though he was one in a billion. What was it? Ah, yes, Runrig Glen Clutha, a border collie with a royal lineage. Do you remember that time at New Year when it was really misty and I took him out for a widdle walk after our big Hogmanay party? It must have been four o'clock in the morning and Fleck just took off at a hundred miles an hour towards the park beside that seminary. Was it called St Peter's? I was shouting, quietly, so as not to waken our neighbours and suddenly that streaker-guy flew past me running naked. It was the first and only time I saw him although all the dog walkers said he ran early in the morning. He was screaming like a schoolgirl, saying a dog had savaged him and he was holding himself down below.

What?

No, as I've said a million times dear one, I don't know if Fleck bit off his sausage. Maybe the man tripped. It was foggy and dark. The ambulance driver said he had never been to Bearsden before and had just moved up from Ayrshire I think it was he said. But all that was later. Anyway, there was more shouting from another man with a much deeper voice. Two dogs were barking. When I found them in the middle of the football pitches Fleck was already mounted on the chocolate lab. The husband, was it Lynda her name? You know, the one who taught at Milngavie Primary and always smoked when she walked her dogs. Remember? She had two chocolate labs, both bitches, breeding them, a wee hobby business, she said. Well the husband, he was going mental. He tried haul Fleck off and got nipped. . . .

What?

No, not Fleck. It was his bitch, Carmelle, who bit him. She was in heat, he said. That's why he had taken her out in the middle of the night. He was quite good about it, said it was his fault. Swore me to secrecy, said his wife would kill him if he admitted he had let Carmelle off her lead in her condition. Oh, and do you remember the other wee collie? Was it Beth she was called? The who was Fleck's 'steady' and he. . . .

What?

Yes, dear one, I know she wasn't a faithful lover and yes, I did see her being served by other dogs so Fleck wasn't the sire to all her litters. The poor wee thing seemed to be permanently preppers. I suppose that's what made her so grumpy when she wasn't in heat. I wonder if. . . .

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You've heard all these stories before, dear one? Well, I'm sorry to be boring you but it was your idea to. . .

What?

So, time to choose, is it? Okey-dokey. Let me think.

Well, it's no contest! Is it Larry? How many years have we been writing stories together? Oh Larry, do you remember the time way, way back when Bill Bloody Gates forced the Windows 10 upgrade on us and I had to replace you. Now, let me think. Yes, you must be Larry the Fifteenth. Well, laddie, time to save your files up to The Cloud before I shut you down for the night, eh?

There we are, all done. So yes, Larry the Laptop - YOU are the thing I love best. Off you go to beddy-byes and slee. . .

What?

No, my dear one, of course it's YOU I love best, of course it is. But you're **not a thing**.

Night, night, everyone.