



## SIGHTSEEING

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**author's note:**

*All the opinions and a few of the more provocative sentences are lifted straight from my daily life. I hear these opinions and this kind of language every day, and from nicer people. That's not to say I agree, but there you go...*

'How many bedrooms d'yi hink it his?'

Aaron, Leanne, Shaun and Nicky are outside Buckingham Palace. Aaron's watching a guard, Leanne's clicking a photo on the digital camera, Nicky's staring menacingly at a couple of multi-coloured, over-friendly Americans, and Shaun's asking a stupid question.

It was the same when they passed a Ferrari earlier. Then, Shaun's daft question concerned the time the car might take to drive from Lochgelly to Kirkcaldy, down the new road – if it had the road to itself, and a license to break the speed limit.

'Mibbe a hunder.'

‘A hunder! It’s big, bit no that big,’ Nicky says.

‘Bit yi’ve goat servant’s quarters.’

Nicky burps. ‘Yi nivir mentioned servant’s quarters, you said bedrooms, like the Royalses bedrooms.’

Shaun turns to Aaron. ‘What di yi reckon, Aeron?’

Aaron’s reflection, in Shaun’s thick plastic shades, is nowhere-near distorted enough to mask his timidity.

‘Ah dunno. Ah’d say thit it might be is much is a hunder even withoot the servant’s quarters.’

‘Yi hear that Nicky? Even withoot servant’s quarters it might be a hunder.’

‘N how would Aaron ken?’

Unlike her boyfriend, Nicky respects Aaron enough to use his real name.

‘Cause Aeron kens hings.’

Leanne, who’d slipped away mid-conversation, has now returned.

‘Wi’ve missed the changing ih the gaird,’ she tells her sister.

‘What time wis that it?’ Nicky says.

‘Half-eleven.’

‘What’s that, like?’ Shaun wants to know.

‘The guards, thi change thum. It’s a big ceremony, ah wantit ti git photies fir ma mum. N if you werenae hungover ah coulda goat thum.’

Aaron sometimes envies his girlfriend’s courage, but reassures himself that it’s only because Leanne will never have to worry about Shaun punching her pus in, at least in public.

Shaun is unrepentant. ‘Sounds borin oanywi. Jist tell yir mum yi couldnae git thum.’

Nicky’s sticking up for her little sister; ‘Bit Shaun, yi dinnae understand, it’s like the Disney World parade, it’s somehin yi’ve goat ti see.’

‘Bit the Disney Land parade wis shite, *Nicola*.’

‘It wis fir the bairns, though.’

‘What di you hink, Aeron?’

Aeron, again. He's told Shaun before, while he's drunk, that his name is Aaron. He doesn't like being called Aeron – not for any specific reason, it just isn't his name. As far as nicknames go, it isn't particularly amusing, witty, or charming, it's just a different way of saying one damn letter...

It's useless. Telling Shaun only makes him more determined to annoy. He always insists it's one of those tongue-things, like Charlie Nicholas calling Ajax 'Ay-jacks' in spite of everyone knowing it's pronounced 'eye-ax'.

They start walking down the street, across the front of the palace. This street is in Monopoly, Nicky points out. Monopoly is a happy memory for Nicky, she played it as a girl, and plays her own children – Dylan, Jody and Caitlin – whenever she's bored. Monopoly also holds memories for Leanne – of her sister being banker and pocketing cash. It wasn't even a bairn's thing, she'd be sixteen and doing it.

As he walks with Shaun, behind the girls, Aaron notes physical difference. He did amateur boxing, for a while, and he often finds himself sizing people up.

Aaron is six foot one inch tall, and he weighs a lean, wiry eleven and a half stone.

Shaun, Aaron estimates, is five foot eight, and, with his beer belly, is probably a stocky thirteen.

'Ken how yi say "it's no is if the Queen's comin" when yir asked ti dress up or tidy the hoose or somehin?'

Aaron would have a reach advantage on Shaun, maybe as much as five or six inches.

'Well, what would you dae if the Queen wis comin?'

He'd also be quicker, more able to dodge, harder to hit, harder to trap.

'Ah'd wear ma shitiest toap, hiv the hoose lookin like a fuckin tip, n ah'd be like, This is what yir country's really like, ya auld cunt.'

Shaun would fucking kill Aaron. Aaron knows it. When Shaun throws him the odd labouring job to bump up his Sky wages, he has it rubbed in his face. Shaun's huge forearms lifting dods of concrete Shaun's already smashed to pieces with a mash, Shaun lifting ten slats to Aaron's eight, and keeping the ten up while Aaron falls down to seven, six, five. Shaun

carrying six or seven layers of monoblocks. Add in Shaun's natural aggression – no contest.

'Ah'd probably dae the same, Shaun. It's like thi say, ih, shi's bound ti think the whole country's spotless.'

Nicky has no class. The opportunity to explore a city, to see some stuff (what, exactly? Leanne's unsure ...celebrities maybe), and it took effort to persuade her to visit the palace. Her excuse: Diana's dead, and the Queen Mum, and they were the only two Nicky really liked.. She'll suit this Brenda thing, Leanne reflects, because she's like every other messed-up muppet on it.

The only reason Leanne has come – with Aaron – is to keep her in check. For some reason Nicky tends to calm down in front of Aaron, to act more ladylike. But already she's been talking herself up – 'Wait till thi git a loaday me.'

'An awfy loatay darkies here, ih?' Nicky says.

'Hiy, thi're lookin!'

'So! Lit thum look. Thir's nuhin wrang wi "darkies". 'S no racist. Nigger's racist, no darkie.'

Nicky looks over her shoulder at a family of black people. Leanne uses the word herself, but never in close proximity to anyone who might fit that description; and she'd never say it as loud as her sister. Same with 'Pakis'. She's also quick to slap Rees whenever he says it – where he picks it up from she doesn't know.

They continue down the street, Nicky on another Brenda-spiel.

'Ah hink the hing aboot Brenda, which isnay true aboot Kilroy, is this shi really tries ti git doon ti the root causes n that. It's like, did yi watch the wan oan the smackheid?'

'Nah,' Leanne mumbles. Occasionally she catches Brenda before Mothers & Toddlers, but she prefers Kilroy, even if he does shout a lot, and tends to be a bit of a twat. In fact, she'd rather watch Sea World, the docu-soap on Five – she loves Killer Whales.

‘Well, oanywi, thir’s this jagger, n ih’s stealin, n ih hates ihs mum n that. N it the start ihs aw wide, bammin folk up, *aw cum oan then* n that. Bit then, wance Brenda starts gaun intae ihs past n that, shi funds oot thit ihs dad went away when ih wis wee. So Brenda’s like, dis that bother yi, yir dad gaun away? Di yi blame yir mum for that? Well, eventually, the poor bugger’s greetin ihs eyes oot.’

‘Aye, shi is quite guid.’

‘Bit that Kilroy, he’s – *woah!*’

Some weird guy’s walked into, and out of, their personal space. He’s skinny, with a feminine figure (wide hips) and he’s dressed all in black, with what are definitely black women’s jeans on, topped off with a tight vest top.

‘Imagine if ih wore that in Lochgelly,’ Nicky says, before going on, proudly: ‘Ih’d git his head kicked in.’

‘What’s wrang wi that, like?’ Leanne says. ‘Jist cause ih’s original, n disnae walk aroond in Rockports, Burberry stuff and basebaw caps like ivry ither erse.’

‘Listen tae it, you goat Rees a Burberry hat.’

‘Aye, bit,’ Leanne stutters, ‘it looks cute oan a . . .’

Leanne looks at the pavement. Behind her, there’s some kind of animal noise – Shaun doing a growl in the guy’s direction.

‘Di you still see that poofy guy?’ Nicky asks. ‘What was his name?’

‘Alan,’ Leanne answers quickly. Alan’s in a mental ward. ‘Nah, we nivr see um.’

The piper’s expression is familiar – it’s the same expression Aaron catches in windows, van wing mirrors, and the odd clean tool whenever he’s with That Certain Someone, whenever he’s granted An Audience With Shaun. It’s feigned interest, amusement... hilarity, when it’s called for. Noting the Irish accent, Shaun started with a brief romanticised account of his ancestors’ journey from Eire to Scotland. Then, rewarding the piper for his attention, he went onto complimenting his piping skills by way of slagging off someone else’s; ‘A chinky cunt playin the pipes!’

Shaun and the piper people-watch for a while, and Shaun's tone changes, becomes more philosophical.

'Yi say yi like it doon here, aye?'

'Aye,' the piper says.

'Ah dunno... Too many niggers n Pakis fir me.'

'Actually, a lot-of them are alright,' the piper says, in a soft voice. 'The Sikhs, they're alright. Hard-working. And the Hindus, they're the ones wear the turbines—'

Aaron sniggers.

'...are alright. It's just the right blacks, and the Muslims. The Muslims are the worst of the fuckin lot. They give the whole of Asia a bad name. What are you like for them up there?'

'Why, yi gonnae gie us mair, like?' Shaun smiles evilly. 'Actually, wi've goat a hell-ih a loatay English cunts the noo.'

'Well,' the piper refuses to bite, 'they're alright. The way I look on it, we're all white people together, and we've got to stick together, especially now. The census was out, did you hear about that? More ethnics than whites in two boroughs of England, you believe that?'

Shaun shakes his head; 'It's fuckin terrible, like. Bit we'll git it nixt.'

'You're right, even back home we're starting to get it. And I'd better warn you, because I saw you were here with your girlfriends. Watch the blacks. They don't care if you're standing with an arm round the girl, they'll come and chat her up. They're like animals.'

Aaron's thinking: *Jesus Christ.*

Shaun, out-loud, after a moment of thought: 'Righty-oh. Cheers neebir.' They buy a coffee jar for their mum; it's green, a hexagonal sort-of shape, with gold lining. Harrods is plainly visible in gold writing, an inch under the lid. Leanne buys another for Aaron's mum and Nicky's going to buy one for Shaun's but, just as she's about to pay, she stops. 'It's green, ah firgoat.' They have to take it back. Shaun's mum won't have a green coffee jar. 'It's bad enough ir son's gaun wi a Catholic,' Nicky explains to her sister.

Leanne is intrigued/amused. Being hated for that reason has a touch of nostalgia to it. It's like hearing an ice cream van.

'See when yi're oan Brenda, could yi dae mi a favour.'

Shaun, abnormally quiet, is staring out across the street.

'If shi starts giein yi any shit, jist tell ir ti fuck off. Cos ah hate when shi starts giein folk shit n thi jist sit there n take it.'

'Bit she's the host though,' Shaun says, still looking out across the street. 'Yi cannae tell the host ti fuck off.'

'Why no? Yi hink the sun shines oot ir erse like?'

Aaron's half-joking, trying to lighten Shaun's mood. Shaun, in spite of being irritating, is easier to deal with when he thinks he's being funny, charming, and friendly. It's when he turns serious that you worry. Overall, he's better when he's not there.

'Look it that,' Shaun's saying.

The other side of the street there's a homeless guy, walking with his hands stuck in the pockets of a grey parka, staring at an imaginary line on the ground.

'Ih looks like David Bellamy,' Aaron says. 'Wi that beard n that.'

'Yi hink that's funny, like?' Shaun spits. 'The cunt's homeless. Yi want ti gan n gie um some money, so ih kin git a boatle ih cider or somehin?'

'Aye, like that'll help um. That's probably why ih ended up like that in the first place.'

'Well it'll keep um fuckin warm,' Shaun half-shouts, and by the last syllable he's on his way across the road.

Aaron watches him hand the homeless guy money, the guy inspecting it as he takes it. Shaun pats the guy on the back then runs back.

'Ah'm starving by the way,' he grimaces, reaching into his pocket for his Lambert & Butler. 'Yi intae gittin a taxi tae McDonald's eftir they're oot?'

The two sisters say it at the same time: *'McDonald's?'*

'What's wrang wi that, like?' Shaun says to both women.

'We're in London,' Nicky says 'wi some ih the best restaurants in the world, n you want to go there.'

Shaun snorts/laughs; 'Yi hink thi'd lit us in the best restaurant in the world, like? Look it us.'

Shaun: Scotland top, jeans, Adidas Sambas.

Nicky: Fila t-shirt, Next jeans, black boots.

Aaron and Leanne: better, but not much.

‘Aye, cum oan. Wi’ll go back n git changed later oan, gan fir a drink n that.’ Shaun catches sight of Nicky’s bags. ‘What did yi git?’

‘A coffee jar fir ma mum, wan fir yours.’

‘Colour is it?’

Nicky turns to Leanne. Their lips are ready to laugh.

‘Ah couldnae live here.’ Nicky’s in the back of the taxi with Aaron and Leanne. Shaun’s in front, talking to the driver about something. You can just make out the tone of his voice as he goes off on another one; it’s what a Formula One car would sound like if it could form words. ‘Could you?’ Nicky asks.

‘Nut, no me,’ Leanne answers. She looks out the window; ‘No thanks.’ She turns to Aaron. ‘Did your brither no stiy here fir a while?’

Aaron, miming being absorbed in the outside world, actually trying to hear what Shaun is saying to the (thankfully) white taxi driver – *the land, thi cannae work it, so thi’re dyin eh hunger n* – ignores the question.

‘Aaron!’ Nicky shouts; it does the trick. ‘Leanne wis jist telling mi aboot yir pal thit stayed here.’

‘Yi mean John, ma brither,’ Aaron says. ‘Ih worked doon here a while, stiyin wi a London couple. Ih sais it wis shite, though. Aw thi dae, ih sais, is go tae work, come back, sleep, go tae work. Cos it takes that long tae travel.’

‘How long, like?’

‘Well, sometimes around two oors, each wiy.’

‘Two oors!’

‘...*South Africa, bit thi’re no developed enough ti ken what ti dae, so the crime’s through the fuckin roof! ...Ower there, thi shoot yi in yir car n THEN thi git yi oot it. That’s they cunts fir yi.*’

‘In two oors ah could git tae Glasgow n back!’

‘*N this stupit war, in Iraq, Iraq, when oor ain folk ir gittin it in Zimbabwi n wi’re daein fuck-all.*’

McDonald's. Aaron likes McDonald's – he grew up with it, almost. He can remember the Wimpy being the forerunner, and then McDonald's moved down Kirkcaldy High Street. Since then it's been a haven, always reliable, dependable – Rees and Chloe love their Happy Meals. Going to McDonald's in a strange place is like buying a Daily Record in Ibiza – comforting.

Leanne likes McDonald's, in spite of what it does to her figure.

Nicky likes McDonald's.

Shaun likes McDonald's so much he eats more than one meal every time he's in here. Today it's a Big Mac Meal, with a side-order of medium fries and a cheeseburger, for Shaun. The rest go for Big Mac meals.

'Youse wantin ti go fir a seat?' Shaun asks the girls.

'Aye, wi'll git wan upstairs.' Nicky tells him.

'Why no doon here?' Shaun wants to know.

'Bicause the view doon here's shite.'

'The view everywhere's shite, it's jist a fuckin street doon there.'

'Well wi want ti look oot oan the street. Fae up high.'

'Fine, fine,' Shaun concedes, shrugging his shoulders, smiling, letting everyone know that it's not fine.

'Well, wi'll git yi up there,' Leanne says. 'Wi'll git straws n that.'

Aaron and Shaun proceed to the queue, Aaron noting that they've ended up behind a young Asian couple, a bunch of white tourists, two black guys, and three white workies.

Shaun, staring up at the pictures of meals like you'd stare up at a skyscraper, doesn't take long to start.

'Look it this wan in front. American Ninja.'

It's happening. Aaron looks down at his feet, acting embarrassed, trying to convey to the couple – if they heard – that he's not on Shaun's side, he's not like Shaun.

He laughs, though, as he looks at the ground. Just a tiny, mousy laugh, but enough to register to Shaun that he enjoyed the joke – American Ninja, that was funny – and that he's a funny guy, Shaun, and that he, Aaron, is on his side.

‘Is this no meant ti be against their fuckin religion, Big Macs.’

Shaun, smiling, half-whispers; ‘Ah hink that’s Jews thit cannae eat meat.’

‘Naw, ah mean America. Unless thi’re here tae bomb the fuckin place.’

Aaron has tears of embarrassment in his eyes. He stares down at his Rockports as a teardrop burns down his cheek and falls onto the tan leather. He wants out of the queue, upstairs, in a seat by the window, where Shaun’s provocation and insults can be directed at vague targets, further away.

‘Would you go wi a darkie?’ Nicky asks Leanne.

‘Ah dunno, why.’

‘Jist wonderin, ih?’

There’s two black guys just walked up the stairs. Too bad for them: there’s no seats, except for the two empty ones at Nicky and Leanne’s filthy table. And they’re reserved.

‘Ah hink thi’re braw,’ Nicky says, looking at the smaller of the two, the one with the baseball cap and the cheeky grin. ‘Ah’ve always thought that, like.’

‘Aye,’ Leanne agrees, ‘Yi always used tae wind dad up aboot it, mind.’

Nicky slips into their dad’s voice:

‘You come here wi a fuckin Sambo n...’

They’ve both been staring, and they’ve been caught. The one with the baseball cap swans over, flashing a broad grin.

‘Alright ladies we were wonderin if these seats were taken?’

It’s a Geordie accent, but cleaned up for their benefit.

‘Aye,’ Nicky says, her accent as normal.

‘Where is it you’re from,’ the black guy says, ‘Scotland?’

‘Aye,’ Nicky says, ‘Lochgelly.’

‘Fife,’ Leanne butts in, ‘near Edinburgh.’

‘Edinburgh, I ken Edinburgh,’ he says, the Geordie peeking through.

‘You ever been to the club... I forget it’s name, but it’s in... Cowgate, is it? Or Canongate?’

Leanne laughs; ‘Sorry, wi wouldnae ken. Wi nivir really go ti Edinburgh.’

‘Where was it you said you were from again?’

They’re halfway up the stairs when Aaron realises that he’s been given a Quarter Pounder instead of a Big Mac. He heads downstairs.

Once there, he lazily wanders towards the counter, trying to make eye contact with as many people as possible. And, with eyes engaged, he puts on this look, which even feels pathetic – a sort-of eyes-down, shamed grimace. *I’m sorry about my pal, I don’t like him either, I only suffer him out of kindness.* He hopes they appreciate it, but their blank expressions are giving nothing away.

After making a show of going for more napkins and sauce, he prepares himself for going back upstairs. But by the first step he’s already heard the shouting, and he stops. He has a decision to make.

He can leave Shaun to take a kicking, from whatever stranger, of whatever race, he’s offended. He takes them well, kickings – better than Aaron ever will. Aaron once watched Shaun’s dad knock the shit out of him on the goal line of a football pitch – a real kicking, not the slap Aaron’d get from his dad. Punches, kicks. He took it like a man; he was twelve.

Shaun might even win, you couldn’t ignore that.

There is no choice.

Shaun, someone he’ll see again, regularly. Someone he’ll go home with, who could end up a brother-in-law.

Versus a stranger.

It doesn’t matter who’s right.

And Shaun’s good with Rees – with all kids. Chloe likes him too...

*‘Uncle Shaun.’*

It doesn’t matter who’s right.

His legs just manage to get him up the stairs. Once he’s up there he gets to see two black guys fighting Shaun. One of them, the bigger one, has Shaun in a headlock, but Shaun is landing some good punches on his eye. The other one, in the hat, is taking kicks at Shaun’s ribcage and groin and landing punches on the back of Shaun’s head.

Nicky, meanwhile, is pulling the big black guy's hair, scratching his face, trying to kick his shins. She's swatted away every few seconds.

Leanne is on her feet, bumping into her boyfriend.

Aaron sleepwalks past her, up to the black guy in the hat. He grabs his arm as it's poised to come down on Shaun's back.

He puts on a conciliatory tone. Pleading, more like.

'Look, man, jist—'

The guy whips off his cap as he turns to him and then, with a small hop, he smashes his forehead into Aaron's mouth.

'WHAT'S THE FUCKIN DOOR LOACKED FIR?' Shaun shouts at the McDonald's girl, who's foreign, African or something. She shrugs her shoulders.

'Well git a fuckin key then.'

Shaun's face is bright-red from strangulation, his right eye's a bloody pool, his nose is burst, probably broken, his Scotland top maroon-stained.

'A fuckin KEY!' Aaron screams/moans. Three of his upper teeth are broken. 'Black bastards,' Aaron murmurs, then spits. 'Black bastards.'

'We're not getting you a key, you'll have to go.'

Another McDonald's guy. He must be the manager. He's slightly older than the rest. He's white.

'Why're yi no gittin thum a key, like, ya English cunt!' Nicky struts up to the guy, the guy turns his back on her.

'Cum oan wi'll go,' Leanne says.

'We've got somebody phoning the police right now,' the manager-guy says.

'WHAT?' Shaun shouts, still in a post-kicking/alcohol daze. 'The polis, what fir? We've done fuck-all. Fuck-all.'

Outside, half-carried along by their better halves, they make for the nearest pub.

'Th wis oanly talking ti us,' Leanne says, 'bein friendly, yi didnae need tae.'

'Yi nivir heard what the taxi driver sais,' Shaun moans. The blood is getting worse, dripping from his eye to his chin in one long red line. 'Thi chat yi up, even if ah'm there thi—'

'Aye,' Aaron whines. He has his arm around Leanne's shoulder, and, instead of spitting (too painful) he's just letting his mouth fill with blood then opening and closing his jaws, so that it runs out the corners of his mouth and down; it stings what's left of his front teeth.

'N thi wir tryin it oan wi us, yi cannae deny that,' Nicky shoots at Leanne.

'Ir you awright?' Leanne asks Aaron.

'Ma teeth... ah've loast ma teeth.'

In the pub they're in the toilets before anyone can finish an objection. Shaun breaks down in tears and tells the girls to leave. A white guy at a urinal turns and watches Shaun then turns away quickly.

'Wid yi believe...' Shaun stops and watches himself in the mirror, watches his bottom lip vibrate and the blood seeping out of his eye. Then, leaning forward, he shoves his right palm over his eye. 'Ma brither's marryin wan ih they nigger bastards.' He laughs through the tears. 'Ma brither's marryin wan ih they black cunts.'

Aaron inspects his wrecked teeth in the mirror. He doesn't answer. The question's not for him, anyway.

'Wid yi believe,' Shaun starts again, turning to the guy at the urinal, 'thit ma brither's marryin wan ih they black nigger bastards?'

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