

My Year Without Lying

Yes We Kant

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1. Funny Peculiar

“Hiya,” I said, as cheerfully as I could. “How are you doing?”

“Good, good,” my brother replied. “Well, come on in.”

I trailed behind him into his house, mum was perched on the end of the sofa, slurping coffee and smoking a roll-up. I pecked her lightly on the top of her head.

“Thanks for coming,” she said.

“Yes,” my brother said. “Thanks.”

“Not a problem,” I replied. ‘It’s good to see you both.’ Of course the circumstances could’ve been better, a family colonic irrigation awayday perhaps. Because for seven blissfully ignorant years we’d believed my eldest brother was living in subdued-misery with a woman called Di. Then just a few days ago Di dropped dead on the loo, which was harsh. And then it was revealed Di was in fact a guy called David, who wore dresses. Which was light years beyond harsh.

“Coffee?” my brother suggested.

“Great,” I replied.

“I’ll have one too,” mum said.

“CAN’T YOU JUST WAIT,” my brother snapped.

“I’ll make them,” I said.

“Two sugars for me,” my brother replied. “Everything’s next to the sink.”

I prepared the coffees and came back in. “Here you go, mum,” I said.

“How are Patti and the kids?” she asked.

“Good,” I lied. Well, the boys were spectacular, but my wife was being something of a pain in the arse. Again. I decided to focus on the positive. “Borja loves his new school, and Elkin’s something of a hit at his.”

“That’s great,” my brother said. Although to be honest after Di it was impossible to believe anything he said. But to be fair he’s always been a bit of a bullshitter, endlessly selling me one insane dream after another. Sales supremo, marketing guru, self-help sage, father. Because of course at one point Di had been pregnant with child. Well, they’d be dating for an age. She’d even emailed us the 12 week scan, which we’d all been thrilled to hear was A-okay, because she’d been suffering terribly. But their daughter had been tragically still born. Or, as it turned out, actually not.

“So....” I began.

“I never loved her,” my brother cut in. “And I didn’t know she was a man. You believe me, don’t you?”

He’d asked me this before, several times in fact. And I’d always managed to swerve the question. But I could avoid it no more. “Yes,” I said. “Of course I believe you.” What else could I say? We were most definitely into chartered waters here, he was one misplaced word away from proffering me some garlic paste.

“Thanks,” he said, “That means a lot to me. In fact I’m going to see Di’s doctor tomorrow, do you want to come too?”

“Oooh yes,” I replied, “I do.”

So just a few fun-filled, coffee drinking, chain-smoking hours later my brother and I were sitting in the GP’s office.

“I didn’t know Di was a man,” my brother said. He was starting to dothly protest way too much.

“I wasn’t Di’s doctor,” the GP explained. She studied her notes for what seemed like an age. “But it seemed his genitalia were intact.”

I gasped audibly.

“Um....um...” my brother said. “I didn’t know. Honest.”

“Are you sure?” The GP asked.

Then something funny happened. Peculiar, not ha-ha. Ha-ha had most definitely left the building. I realised something quite profound. He might be madder than a busload of monkeys, but he was my responsibility. So I took control. “My brother,” I said, “has already explained he didn’t know Di was a man. Let’s move on, shall we.”

The GP puffed a little. “The autopsy,” she said, “won’t be back for a couple of weeks. They’ll be no funeral before then.” She closed her file, we were done.

“Thanks for your time,” I said, standing up. “We really appreciate it.”

My brother stood up too. “Yes,” he added, “we do.”

We walked into the street, and I handed my brother a cigarette. But there was more, the night before I'd had an email from my sister in the States. "She says," I continued, "at one point you wanted to become a woman too."

"It's true," my brother replied.

"Um...right," I said. He didn't seem fazed at all. In fact none of the recent madness seemed to faze him whatsoever. Which was funny peculiar. Di had testicles for heaven's sake.

"I did want to become a woman," he said. "But it was just a phase, and now it's passed. But I didn't know Di was a transsexual."

"Are you sure?"

"YES," he barked.

"Sorry, sorry" I said. And I was. "Sorry," I said again.

But I had a plan. So a little later when he'd nipped out to buy more coffee, I went online and found the number of the GP. After an age the receptionist finally put me through. "I was in your office," I said, "a little while ago. With my brother. We were talking about...er...his girlfriend. Well, sort of girlfriend."

"I remember," the GP replied.

"Great. Thanks. Well, I'm a little worried about him. I think he might be insane."

"Why?"

"Because he lied to us for seven years. We all thought Di was a woman."

"He says he thought she was a woman too."

“Ah, but he’s lying. He lies quite a lot, you see. And he wanted to become a woman too. So that just proves it. Although I knew he knew all along. Although that’s not really important. My father went insane you see. We’re all a little barking of course, but after my father I really know about madness. And I think perhaps he’s gone properly crazy too. And the real problem is I’m only here for a few days, I live in Madrid you see. I’ve got a wife and a couple of kids, so I can’t stay any longer. So is there someone my brother can talk to? Someone who could really help him when I’ve gone?”

“He can see a therapist on the NHS,” the GP explained.

“Great. Is there someone we can see someone today?”

“The waiting list is between six to eight months.”

“You’re kidding?”

“Some patients have to wait up to a year.”

“THAT...THAT...THAT...” I stammered. “THAT’S COMPLETELY INSANE.”

2. Irritable Burble Syndrome

Mum was sitting on the sofa, puffing on a roll-up. "What did the GP say?" she asked.

"Not much," I explained. "Another coffee?"

"Great," she replied.

My brother came back in, and I made him a coffee too. By recent standards it was turning out to be quite a fun day.

"I'm off for a bath," mum said.

I decided to give my brother some good news. "Did mum tell you I got sacked?"

My brother looked concerned. Cheerfully so. "Yes," he said. "Sales isn't for everyone, you know."

Fraternal rivalry is funny, I hadn't seen him for years, but he'd constantly phone trying to prove how far superior he was to me, despite considerable evidence to the contrary. Except bizarrely enough when Di was with fantasy child. Patti was pregnant with our first then, and my brother and I kind of bonded in impending fatherhood. We chatted about morning sickness, controlling women, baby names. We talked like equals, we were both in a tiz,

and it was fun. Particularly for my brother, I suspect, who must've been having a right old laugh at my expense.

"Anyway," I said, "the money was crap. And *the Guardian* thing with Jason is going really well. So everything will be fine."

I'd only planned to sell websites and annual reports until *the Guardian* project came good. But it took a lot longer than planned, so I had to try and persuade Patti to get a job too, which was like pulling teeth. And when she eventually found one it was like pulling much bigger, scarier, husband hating teeth.

I went into the garden and phoned her at the office.

"Tell me," she yapped. I wasn't offended though, the Spanish are blunt to the point of insulting. Particularly when they love you.

"It's me," I said cheerily.

"I know," she barked again. "Tell me."

"Er....um...."

"Have you talked to your mother about money?"

Fuck, no. "Yes, yes. It's all sweet."

"Unlike my boss," Patti replied, "who's being a real bitch. I really think they're going to sack me. Can you believe it? Sack me?" So she told me how her boss has started obsessing about her work, how she actually accused my wife of being rude. "I'm never impolite am I?"

"Nooooo," I replied.

And then she went on to explain how our maid is playing up again, how the kids were being a nightmare, how her mother is calling her several times a day to update her on the minutiae of trying to buy the country cottage. “And now my irritable bowel syndrome is back,” she continued. “It’s like an enormous burble inside.”

“Bubble,” I said laughing.

“Burble then,” she said.

“I love you,” I said, still laughing.

“I’ve got to go,” she replied.

And so she hung up. But it was okay, we’d talk properly later. I sent her a text, “I really do love you,” I wrote. She had a golden soul, albeit one that shone somewhat miserably most of the time. But that was okay, because we were ever-so close to the true Patti bursting through. I sent her another text. “Don’t worry about me. Everything’s fine here.”

Although it was undoubtedly great chatting with Patti, I still felt a little low. So I thought I’d cheer myself up by phoning Jason. Although in my heart of hearts I knew it wouldn’t cheer me up at all. “Hello mate,” I said. “How are you doing?”

“I’m fucking pissed off,” Jason replied. He’s one of my oldest mates and he’s been consistently pissed off for the last 20 years. Generally fuckingly so.

“Is it *the G*?” I asked. *The G*, as I’d recently learned is media speak for the Guardian newspaper. We’d entered into a partnership with them to utilise their 50 million website visitors to take Jason’s language learning revolution global. Working with *the G* was the opportunity of a lifetime, although quite plausibly not for them. Because oddly enough they were incapable of dealing with Jason’s violent mood swings, fishwife mouth and total intransigence to any ideas that weren’t his own. We were mates so I loved him despite it all. Until

we started working together, that is. Now, broadly speaking, I hate him as much as *the G* do. “Did you shout at them?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied, with considerable pride.

“Ah,” I said. Which might seem something of a feeble response, but it was all part of my master plan to negotiate the complex relationship between Jason, *the G* and our technology partner, Mr Internet. Who, FYI hated Jason too. “Look,” I said, “I’ll give *the G* a call. Everything will be fine.”

“You always say that,” Jason replied. “And it never is. You said the bank loan was a shoe-in, and when I talked to them they said it was looking dodgy.”

That’s because you spoke to them. “Sure, mate,” I said.

“Phone them today,” he ordered.

“I’m kind of busy here.”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “How’s it going?” That’s the great thing about Jason he may well be a narcissistic, self-obsessed arse. But he’s got a heart of gold. “You okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” I said. “But my brother’s still saying he knew nothing. And he’s pretty sick. Mentally, you know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Fuck knows. Although getting drunk with you tomorrow sounds like a plan.”

“It’s a date. You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, fine. I’m good in a crisis. Look, I’d better go. I, er....” there was nothing I actually had to do. “I’ve got to phone *the G*.”

But I didn't, my brother started bickering with mum so I had to go back inside to calm things down. Then we watched a little Sky News, which my brother likes. Then I went out to buy us all dinner from a cheap Chinese takeaway my brother heartily recommended.

"How are you doing?" the guy behind the counter asked.

"Couldn't be better," I replied. "Do you have anything without garlic?"

I returned with an assortment of rank looking dishes. "Grubs up," I said.

"I don't want much," mum said.

I handed her a generous portion. "You always eat a lot in the end," I said. "So I thought I'd just cut to the chase."

"That's so true," my brother said. "She does eat a lot."

"Spring roll, mum?" I suggested.

"Great," she replied.

I put my fish and chips on a plate.

"I just love," my brother said, "Chinese takeaways."

"Me too," I replied. My mobile rang, it was Patti, I rejected the call

"Can I have a chip?" mum asked.

"Sure," I replied, passing her my plate.

"Hmm," she said. "They're good."

“Take some more,” I said.

“Do you mind?” She asked.

“Noooo, not at all.” She took five, including the big fat one I’d been saving until last.

I sent Patti a text. “Things a little difficult at the moment. I’ll try and call later x”

“These chips are really good,” mum said.

“Have another,” I said.

“Can I have one too?” my brother asked.

“Of course,” I replied, passing my brother my plate. “Take as many as you like.”

3. Love, love

In the end *the G* phoned me. “How funny is that,” I said, “I was just about to call you. How are you doing?”

“Great,” *the G Man* replied. “And you?”

“Not bad at all,” I said. I hate corporate conversations, no one ever says what they really think. Which is why I clearly couldn’t say it either. “Fantastic, in fact,” I said.

“That’s great,” *the G Man* said. “Although I think we’ve got a bit of a problem.”

“What’s that?” I asked. It would be churlish to prejudge anything, however patently obvious it might be.

“Jason,” he replied. “Now, you know I’m fond of him.”

“Yes, I do,” I said. “Well, we all are.”

“But he’s completely out of control. And some people have had enough. Not me, you understand.”

“Of course.”

“In fact there’s talk of cancelling the whole project.”

“Please don’t do that,” I said. “He’s under a lot of financial pressure at the moment. But you know we’re talking to the bank about a business loan?”

“Yes. In Jason’s words they’re being ‘fucking dicks’.”

I laughed. “He’s so melodramatic. No, it’s all good. In fact they reckon it’s a shoe-in. I just need to complete a few more forms and then we’re done. And we’re close to a couple of other deals, new clients, you know. And with some money in his pocket Jason will be a lot more relaxed. Don’t worry, I’ve got a meeting with him later today, I’ll talk to him again.”

“I’ll do my best at this end,” *the G Man* replied. “But I can’t make any promises.”

“I know you’ll do what you can. Well, I’d better go, we’ve got loads on today.”

I sent Jason a message. “I got through to the G in the end. All sweet. Just stay calm for a while. Please.”

I went back into my brother’s house. He was out buying more milk. Mum was sitting on his sofa drinking coffee and smoking. “Everything okay?” she asked.

“Fine. I was just chatting with *the Guardian*.”

“*The Guardian*, really,” mum replied, quite clearly impressed. She’d been reading it for over 40 years, and they’d even written an obituary on my father, which was still a source of considerable family pride. “How’s it all going?”

“Really well,” I replied. “There are a few teething problems of course, but it’ll come good in the end.”

“If you need any money.....” mum started.

I scrunched up my face. “Thanks,” I replied. “Sorry.”

“Don’t,” she said.

“Sorry,” I said again. Mum and I never quarrel, I love that. We normally chat three or four times a week, about books, philosophy, life. And like so many good conversations they’re as much about what we don’t say. Which is why we use little codes like ‘all my love’ and ‘love, love’, and never actually say it all.

“Don’t,” she said. “Just tell me about the kids.”

So I told her all about Borja’s Don Quixote obsession, the latest development in Elkin’s biting fixation. For years I thought I understood love, but until the kids came along I didn’t have a clue. Love is chatting about the Don for hours, tickling the phantom nibbler, making their world spectacular. Just by appearing, just by being.

And I know it’s a terrible cliché but I want my kids to have all the things I never did. I want them to have nice clothes, to feel safe, not to have to endure the anarchy of alcoholism, of mental illness, not to be forced to take responsibility for their father’s serial shortcomings. To know every second of every single day that they are loved. Which is probably why I follow them round saying “I love you,” until they want to hurl. Yet, I’m assured they know they’re loved, so I really don’t care.

“I want to see them soon,” mum said. “And Patti too.”

“Mi casa es su casa.”

“That I understand,” mum said, smiling.

“Your Spanish is a lot better than you think. You’re good with languages.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“Well I do,” I said. “And you are.”

“I’m not so sure.”

This could rumble on for a while. “And far more importantly,” I said. “How are you?”

“Crap,” mum replied, laughing.

“You don’t have to lie to me, mum. How are you? Really?”

“Crap,” mum said again. “You’ve done a great job, though. I couldn’t have survived all this on my own.”

“We did it together, we’re the crisis management dream team. He’ll be okay, you know. We’ll sort it out together. Deal?”

“Deal,” mum said.

My brother walked back in. “Time to go,” I said, standing up, giving mum a little hug and heading out the door.

My brother and I sat on the top deck of the bus together. He’d kindly offered to accompany me to the station, which thus far actually seemed like an excuse to bitch rotten about mum.

I cut him short, I was running out of time. “I’m worried about you,” I said.

“I’ll be fine,” my brother replied. “Shit happens, you know.”

“There’s shit and there’s shit, you know. Can I be completely honest for a moment?”

“Sure.”

“I’m worried about you.”

“You already said that.”

“I like to repeat myself,” I explained. “It’s one of our lovable family traits.”

“Dad liked to repeat himself, that’s for sure. All that intellectual crap.”

“I think you’re still angry with him.”

“The past is the past. We made our peace.”

“You didn’t make your peace at all,” I said. But the problem was he believed that they did. And it was all my fault. And it was time to make amends. “You...You wanted to become a woman for heaven’s sake. And it’s just...not...well...normal. Look, I did some pretty weird things after dad died. There was the goat herder for starters.”

My brother laughed. “Yes, what was that all about?”

“Insanity. However brief. I felt like shit after dad died, so I married the goat-herder to escape it. And after I divorced her, I was close to becoming an alcoholic like him.”

“You never told me.”

“It was a crap time in my life. I don’t really drink any more, with the kids and all. It took me ages, but I’m okay about him now, in fact I hardly think about him at all. But I think you need help.”

“I went to see dad’s psychiatrist after he died.”

“You went once. You’re not over him. This was all about him.”

“I suppose,” my brother said, “it couldn’t do any harm to talk to someone. Thanks.”

“All part of the service.”

“I could see someone on the NHS I’m sure.”

“No,” I said, a little too quickly perhaps. But he didn’t twig. “Private would be better,” I continued. “I’m sure we can find someone good. Don’t worry, about the money, we’ll find a way.”

We got off the bus and I handed him a cigarette. We smoked in silence for a while.

“Well,” I said. “Best get going.”

“Sure, sure” he replied. “Well, thanks for coming.”

“It was great seeing you,” I said. “Really.” I didn’t want to, but I did. I edged towards him and put down my bag. And then I stretched out my arms and gave him a hug. A big, big, hug. “I love you,” I said, squeezing him tightly.

“And I love you,” he replied.

I released him, picked up my bag and started to walk away. And when I turned for one last look, I saw my brother was crying too.