

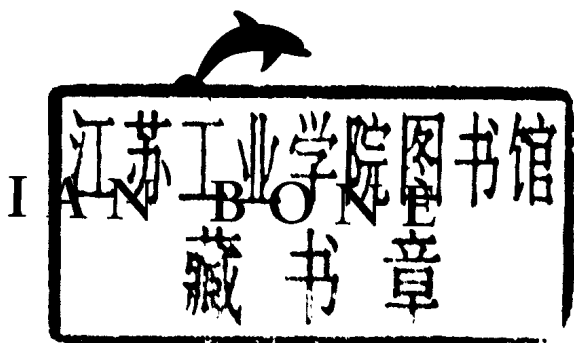
That Dolphin Thing

Did you hear the joke about the dolphin . . . ?



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1



This is not going to be another one of those dying mother stories. For a start, I just can't see myself doing that crying thing, that standing on the beach with the sun slowly setting into the ocean thing. I just can't see it.

Besides, Mum promised me a happy ending. Those were the exact words she used that day she came home from seeing the specialist in the city. 'A happy ending, Mac,' she'd said. 'And who knows? It might even end in a punch-line.'

A punch-line – a joke. That's my mum all over, can't take her mind off jokes for one second. Even when she's just found out that she's got cancer.

If I were asked to describe Mum, I'd start with one of those TV ads. The ones with the soft, golden lighting and the dreamy music. The ones with the radiant woman sitting by the fire, her long, flowing hair shining in the fire-light as she wraps her child in a huge, fluffy bath-towel.

Then I'd say, 'Scrap that image forever, 'cause that ain't my mum!'

We *do* have bath-towels at home – hand made out of Yak's hair. I swear you can hear sadistic laughter from these things when you open the cupboard.

And as for the long, flowing hair in the fire-light . . . well, she does have long hair, but it's kind-of dull, with grey streaks in it, and she mainly has it pulled back out of the way as if it were a nuisance. Her face is kind-of plump, in a friendly way, and her cheeks are always rosy.

My mum's a professor. Truly. She analyses quips, jokes, jests and jibes – pulls them apart to discover their 'hidden meaning', their 'cultural signifiers', their 'semantics'. And I think she also checks them out to see if they're funny. She likes a good laugh – throws her head back and lets fly with this sound that's a cross between a sick hyena and a jack-hammer. Then she wipes a tear from her eye, re-adjusts her glasses that sit on her reddish nose and looks around with that sparkle in her eye.

One of her favourite sayings is, 'I'd rather have a laugh than do the dishes'. She's not joking! You should see our kitchen. When she cooks, she uses every single pot and appliance we own! And who cleans up the wreckage? Whoever can't stand the mess anymore. Sometimes I wonder if Mum and Dad haven't got degrees in biology with the number of moulds they grow.

I'd rather have a laugh. That's my mum all over. She's a closet stand-up comedian, and I'm a stand-up motor-mouth. Together we fire off corny, tired, lame and

over-used jokes at each other just for the heck of it. Then we laugh until it's dangerous to our bodies, and she has to take out her hanky and blow that glowing honker of hers just to calm down. That's when she looks at me with that sparkle in her eyes. It's not the jokes we're laughing at, it's ourselves. We're the only people left in the world who still remember those old jokes.

We'd rather have a laugh . . . than have cancer.

I guess there's lots of ways a mother can tell her son bad news about having cancer. Mum started with a joke. 'Don't worry,' she said as she sat on my bed. 'I'm not here for a mother/son chat.'

'That's just as well,' I fired back at her. 'Because I'm not really your son.'

'So, the milkman finally spilled the beans?'

Some joke, huh? We gave it about a millisecond's smile, then Mum went quiet and held my hand. Mum's not normally a hand-holder. I looked into the hallway to see where my sister had got to. Maybe she could take on a bit of this hand-holding action. Perhaps my two older brothers could come home unexpectedly from University and muscle in – grab a finger or two. But no, it was just up to me.

Mum spoke. 'It's not good news, mate. I'm afraid the lump in my breast is malignant. I've got cancer.'

I had no idea what to say. There was nothing in my head, not even a stupid joke. Mum usually appreciates a joke in an awkward moment. But I guess this moment was too awkward. Eventually I nodded, just so she'd know that I hadn't lapsed into a trance-like state, and

she nodded back. Cancer. Then Dad popped his head round the doorway and said, 'Kettle?'

I jumped, and Mum squeezed my hand tighter, looking me dead in the eye. 'That would be lovely,' she replied.

My father always says 'Kettle?' instead of 'Cup of tea?'. Don't ask me why. I quizzed Mum about it once and she said it was because he's a professor of philosophy.

'They see the cause before the effect, Mac.'

They see the cause before the effect. That's the sort of answer you'd expect from a professor of humour. *They* see the joke in everything . . . except maybe cancer.

Mum has been studying humour for years and years. She has a copy of every single joke that she knows or has heard, all written on little green cards in her peculiar hand-writing. There's thousands of these joke cards and she keeps them in special drawers with letters on the front like 'BE - BR'. There's jokes about cats, and jokes about dogs, and jokes about blondes. You'd find Blondes in the 'BE - BR' drawer.

I asked her once why she didn't store her jokes on a computer like any normal person. She said you had to be able to feel a joke in your hands. To smell it and get a whiff of the dust that has gathered on it over the decades. She was right about the dust part. We have an entire room in our house dedicated to these drawers and their jokes, and it's the quietest, eeriest place I know. There's thick carpet on the floor so you can't even hear yourself walk in. The only sound that ever echoes around the room is the slide of a drawer as it opens, or

the crack of your own laughter (or groaning, depending on the standard of the joke).

It's called a canonical list of jokes, or a canon for short. Perhaps that's why bad stand-up comedians go 'Boom! Boom!' after they've told one of their bad jokes.

Thanks to Mum's canon, I was the world's expert on bad jokes . . . until that moment she crushed my knuckles. That's when I realised that life was a bad joke.

Mum tried to reassure me that everything would be okay. 'The specialist says the prognosis is good,' she said. 'He wants to operate quickly. If he had his way I'd be in the hospital tonight . . .' Her words trailed off as she stared into the corner of my room.

'For the operation?' I asked.

Mum looked at me as if I'd just blown in from the window. 'Mm? Yes . . . He's a bit frustrating, this specialist. Gives me significant looks and very little information, then tells me the decision is entirely up to me. I just wanted to come home . . . I had to tell you and Belinda first . . .' She was gone again. It seemed very important for her to study the geography of my room's corners, so I let her be. Eventually, she looked up again. 'Anyway, once the operation is done I'll have follow-up treatment and I'll be back to normal. So, no need to worry.'

Imagine that, she was telling *me* not to worry.

We went out to have our cup of tea, but Dad was circling the kitchen with a lost look on his face. The kettle was still cold. My sister, Belinda, arrived home – all kissed-out, no doubt – and put the kettle on. Mum told

her the news about the cancer and she blinked her eyes a lot but managed not to cry, which was a major relief. We rang my older brothers in the city and there were lots of silences as Mum listened to what they had to say, especially Barton who is studying medicine.

At some stage throughout all this I walked out and went to the canonical list of jokes. I opened the 'CA – CL' drawer and checked, because I had to know if anyone had ever found anything funny about cancer. The closest I came was a joke about a cat. I think it kind-of summed up my mood.

A man named Joe goes away on holidays and asks his best friend to look after his cat and dog for him. Joe rings his best friend whilst away and says, 'How are the pets getting on?'

'Your cat died,' replies the best friend.

'You can't tell me horrible news that way,' says Joe.

'How do you want me to tell you?' asks his best friend.

'You have to break it to me slowly,' says Joe. 'You have to say, "The cat's on the roof." Then you say, "The cat's near the edge of the roof." Then say, "The cat's fallen off the roof." Then say, "The cat is dead."'

'Okay,' says his best friend. 'I hear you.'

'So,' says Joe. 'How's my dog getting on, then?'

'How's the dog?' says the best friend. 'He's on the roof!'

He's on the roof. Boom! Boom!

2



Moving the family to Shell Bay was one of my parents' better jokes. Dad is writing the definitive book on something-or-other to do with philosophy. He said the move would give him peace and quiet. Mum added that it was going to improve our lifestyle.

Whose life did she think she was styling, anyway?

My slightly older sister, Belinda, was madly in love with a skate nut in the city at the time and had to leave him behind. My two older brothers, Barton and Oscar, were in the middle of their Uni courses and had to find somewhere else to live. And me? I couldn't think of any worse torture than to live in a seaside town like Shell Bay.

I hate sand because it gets into my ears and won't come out. I hate the sun because it fries me so red that I look like a creature from Lobster World. And I hate the ocean, full stop.

We've been here six months now and it's taken nearly all that time for the locals to work out if I'm a 'townie', a 'surfie' or a 'farm kid'. Apparently it's very important for them to know. They've recently decided that I'm a 'townie', mainly because I don't fit into the other two categories. We live on an acre of land by the sea, which normally would have qualified me for both 'surfie' and 'farm kid'. But I NEVER venture near the water and the only thing growing on our lot is weeds. So 'townie' was the safest bet.

I once asked Mum why they added an 'ie' after town and surf to classify those kids, but didn't add one after 'farm'. Mum's hot on classifications.

'Probably because "farmie" doesn't sound quite right,' she said.

'No,' added my father, 'it sounds like a child with a speech impediment trying to say "Mummy".'

Believe me, for my dad that was a top-class joke. *Farmie! Farmie! Fait for fe!*

I suppose the best way to expose the numerous delights of this seaside hamlet (and my new home) is to give you the quick travelogue. Shell Bay is a long arc of sand and bald hills that sweeps between two dramatic points. The small population of Shell Bay consists of farmers, the people in the township (of which I am an honorary member) and the people who live permanently in the houses perched next to the sea. The rest of the houses are empty for most of the year, spilling over with noisy families during holiday time. Blah, blah, blah . . .

Maybe a stand-up comedy routine would be better. After all, Shell Bay is one big joke. The guy who thought up the name, 'Shell Bay' was a genius. I walked the length and breadth of its sandy shore the first week we were here and only managed to find one shell. It was a tiny, broken thing wedged between two rocks. 'Look!' I cried, holding up the only existing proof that there had indeed been shells in Shell Bay. But then I stumbled and dropped the shell into the ocean and my 'proof' slowly vanished forever.

Then there's the blow-hole . . .

The blow-hole is the main tourist attraction of Shell Bay. Well actually, it is the *only* tourist attraction. It sprays out a huge spout of sea-mist into the air and generally makes everyone wet who happens to be anywhere near it. Tourists (who are lovingly referred to as 'martians' around here) love the blow-hole and come in bus loads to photograph it. Perhaps they like getting wet.

Locals, however, go for other attractions, such as the pier. Believe me, 'pier' is a very fancy name for the pathetic wooden construction that juts out into the ocean from near the Shell Bay supermarket. This pier is so old it has the words 'Jesus Woz Here' carved into it. This pier is so old it was mentioned in Captain Cook's log book. Entry number 267: 'Must tear down old relic of pier when we settle this land'.

Even the Shire Council noticed that the pier was old, and that's saying something. They hired carpenters to repair all the holes and broken planks along the

walkway. No longer would we hear the plaintive cry of a martian caught in one of the death-traps. The crowning triumph of the pier's renovation is the grand archway at the entrance which boldly displays the pier's new name: the 'Sue Cossington Pier'. Don't ask me who Sue Cossington was. Though the name is vaguely familiar. I think she might have been some pioneer woman with a scowl and a bad haircut.

Sue Cossington Pier sticks out about twenty metres into the sea, but the water below rarely gets deeper than about a metre. The Council put up large signs at the end of the pier warning people not to dive into the water. Which is a bit like putting a sign next to a highway warning the public not to step out in front of buses.

It isn't diving that attracts the locals to this recently renovated relic of olden days, it's fishing. Some come to dangle a line, some to watch the former dangle their lines, and some to ride around on their bikes, smoke cigarettes, swear a lot and make comments about those who dangle their lines. I don't fit into any of the above because I never go to the pier. Actually, I did walk out there once, one summer night a while back when I was bored witless. A couple of local 'fishermen' were – you guessed it – dangling a line.

'G'day,' they said to me.

'Hi,' I muttered back. So far, an intelligent conversation for Shell Bay. There was a bit of a silence, so I filled it with the standard standing-on-a-pier question. 'Catching much?'

'Not much,' they replied.

And that was it. I turned and walked away. A joke sprang into my head as I dodged a broken plank. (This was before the renovation). *You'd catch more fish in your bath-tub than you would here, mate.* I thought it wasn't too bad, but when I later suggested that Mum add it to the canon she just grunted at me.

Moving on past the pier we come to the Shell Bay Area School. This is where the kids from the district come to intimidate each other. And if you look closely you'll see a bit of education and kissing going on as well. I avoid the intimidation by sitting in the library during lunchtime. The kissing avoids me, and I barely scrape in on the education part. Not because I'm educationally challenged (there's a whole category of 'challenged' jokes in Mum's canon). No, my education problems stem from two sources. One: I have no faith in the teachers. Two: I'm bored. But that's okay, because I think they have little faith in me, and I'm sure I bore the heck out of them.

Enough of the school. Turn back again because I forgot to mention the entertainment hub of Shell Bay. The supermarket. This 'monster' is the biggest shop in Shell Bay, mainly because it is the *only* shop in Shell Bay. It has a take-away food section, a video library section and a games 'arcade' section. Although with only three games machines it's more like a huddle than an arcade.

The night-life party-animals of Shell Bay spend their time hanging out at the supermarket, and are so expert at the three games that they never bother to play them anymore. Instead they sit on the bench seat outside,

smoking cigarettes and spitting into the gutter. Champion gutter-spitter is Cameron Dunstan, a gorilla-shaped senior who specialises in dunking kids' heads down the toilet. His main challenger is a senior girl, Killer Kusinski, who is rumoured to have put a teacher in hospital last year with a right cross.

That then is Shell Bay, everything that an overly skinny, angry-skinned fourteen-year-old such as myself could ask for. Four of my favourite things: a shop, a pier, a school and . . . the ocean. That enormous, vast, cold expanse of treacherous water that is just waiting for this spotty youth to lose all reason and throw himself in. And up until that awful day when Mum came home with her news, the ocean didn't stand a chance. I had no cause to even contemplate a dip.

But that's all changed. Now I have a HUGE reason to swim in the sea, and it's all my fault.

And wouldn't you know it, the whole shemozzle started with a joke.

3



Some things don't have to be a joke to be funny. Like when people try to pass off their weird and wacky ideas as serious stuff. 'Unintentional humour' is what Mum calls it. Meaning they didn't know that what they were saying was so dopey that any normal person would laugh at them. Mum doesn't have a category for unintentional humour in her canon. She only studies the type of humour that lame comedians use to bore the heck out of everyone.

I guess I'm a bit of a fan of unintentional humour.

I was surfing the net, and for no particular reason I typed 'dolphins' into the search engine. Don't ask me why, I just did. I think maybe I'd seen some dolphins swimming out to sea a while back, and wondered if Shell Bay would crack a mention. Whatever the reason, up came a whole lot of garbage sites. They were mostly dead boring, until I hit upon this 'inspirational' story

about a lady who was saved from cancer by a dolphin. No kidding. It was so silly I was sure it would give Mum a chuckle.

The lady is standing in the water by the sea somewhere, or maybe she's beside a pool, I don't know. Anyway, there's this dolphin swimming around and it splashes her. The lady is angry. She tells the dolphin to take a hike. But Flipper isn't paying attention. It splashes her again. Now the lady is totally crazed, and she jumps into the water. She's gonna smack that dolphin. She's gonna take that mammal down, but the dolphin starts smacking *her!* It bumps into her hip with its nose. Again and again and again. Maybe Flipper is having a mid-life crisis, or maybe it's just completely mental, but it won't lay off. Bam! Bam! The lady is starting to hurt heaps, so she gets out of the water. Oh man, she thought dolphins were peaceful, inspirational creatures. Just her luck to swim with the world's only psychotic dolphin.

For the next few days the lady's hip keeps aching where the dolphin hit her. The pain won't go away, so she sees a doctor. The doctor is a bit worried by the aching, says a dolphin can't hurt you that much, so he checks her out. He finds she's got the early stages of cancer in the bones in her hip. The doctors are able to treat it and the cancer is cured. Any later and she would have been a goner. The lady tells everyone about how the dolphin 'told' her she had cancer and saved her life.

It's got to be a crock, don't you reckon? The dolphin probably thought she was on the nose. Get it? On the nose.