SONGS IN THE KEY OF STRIFE – I'VE GOT 99 PROBLEMS AND BEING JAY Z IS ONE

Neil Renton

At the age of forty-two, I decided what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I wanted to be Jay Z.

What comes to mind when you think of him?

Rapper. Businessman. Inventor of his own colour Owner of a basketball team. Married to Beyoncé. Once played a gig in the Southside Library.

The last fact might have caught you by surprise, but it's true. Or it was in my head anyway.

At the height of my lows, I was signed off work, but I was too embarrassed to say anything. I was going to the cinema, but it was costing me money. Not only was there the ticket price but

throw in the Poundland run for snacks and mini bottles of Irn Bru, and it was all adding up. A nightmare for someone like me who doesn't like spending his own cash.

I was randomly bumping into people I knew, which made me think they were suspicious of what I was up to. If I stopped for a moment to prevent myself from overthinking, I would have realised they'd be too busy living their lives to worry about Mine. The library seemed like a good idea. Who goes to one nowadays, I reasoned. Sad but true. I'd go, get some peace from my thoughts, and rock up the road, imagining I had been at the job I was signed off from as if nothing was wrong.

I based myself at a wee round table, surrounded by books on music, films, and other arts, as opposed to boring stuff like history or geography. I had a To-Do List, which was a joke. There were sandwiches that I'd prepared as if I was going to the office. I'd sit on the bench outside and throw them to the ants, making various medical appointments that I couldn't decide whether I was going to attend.

Leaving for a spot of fresh air was something I enjoyed doing. For one, there seemed to be fewer wasps than there were indoors. It was also quieter, so I liked to escape the absolute shrill

of the place. When I was a kid, a library was a place of solace and tranquillity. Not anymore.

They're full of parent-and-toddler groups singing nursery rhymes and banging granite tambourines on the concrete floor. There's folk clattering the lids of a broken printer in the vain hope that it'll work. And no one seems to be able to talk in tones less than people discussing their mundane working days through the adverts at the cinema. That loud.

To be fair, I could have been Jay Z in the Southside Library. Complete with a full backing band consisting of DJs, hyenas on backing vocals, and the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and we'd be struggling to be heard above the elderly guy who was having problems plugging in his laptop charger.

When I wasn't in the great outdoors being chased by giant, buzzing terrors that had escaped the confines of the library, I was at the table. My table. And for some reason, I wasn't Neil Renton from Leith.

I was Jay Z from Brooklyn.

How did this happen? It's not as if I was possessed by the spirit of the big man as he was very much still alive. For some reason, I assumed I was him.

Remember his Glastonbury performance? He was trolled by Noel Gallagher beforehand, who questioned why a rapper should be headlining such a prestigious music festival and British institution. Jay Z didn't give a toss and instead came in to a sample of one of Gallagher's best-known tracks, the Oasis song 'Wonderwall,' pretending to play guitar. Outstanding.

His stage presence mesmerised me. I have none. If you don't believe me, ask the good people at The Stand Comedy Club in Edinburgh, who provided such feedback during a stint I had on their Red Raw Open Mic Night.

I could have learned a lot from Shawn Carter, and I was transfixed by the recall. If my memory serves me right, he did a lot of walking that Saturday night, and some of it was backwards.

It's a difficult thing, walking backwards. Try it when you get a minute. Preferably not while reading this. And not at the top of stairs—nine out of ten people who fall backwards down stairs die.

But give it a go when you're in a safe space. Walking backwards, not falling down the stairs. It requires confidence, self-awareness, and balance. You need to know where you're going when you can't see where you're going.

So there I was, convinced I was Jay Z. I'd initially pace the area, picking up a decent speed. Then I'd stop, play to the audience of a barely used pad and nervously chewed pen. And I'd walk backwards around the table.

At this point, my mind was massively out of control. I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't care. I didn't breathe; I just panicked. In. Out. In. And I think Out.

If I read, I'd regain some sort of moral compass. Off I went to the fiction section. How hard could it be to pick a book with so many of them? Maybe 99 at least. I went forward, took some side steps, then a wee bit backwards.

Really fucking hard is how hard it was to pick a book at that point. Where do you start? What category gets your interest? It's a commitment, reading. You're giving up your time to be entertained or educated. Or both.

Irvine Welsh. He'll do. You know where you are with the big man. But there weren't any of his books. Back to the drawing board. Back to the table I was circling. Back to walking backwards.

Thankfully, me thinking I was Jay Z was a minor blip. And it's probably for the best I'm not really him, as everyone will tell you.

Especially Beyoncé.

QUICKSAND AND CAFFEINE

Mark Fleming

My mind was whirring, but for a moment, I was smiling again. Trainers sinking into the wet sand, then extricating, the sloppy sounds took me back to Craiglockhart primary, my mate Sparks shoving his hand under his oxter, delighting as the rasping drew giggles, basking in Miss McKenzie's disgust. Next to him, my cheeks would flare like the time Johnny Hamilton caught us pocketing marker pens after our paper rounds. When the ex-Hearts twat sacked us on the spot, Sparks guffawed in his face. But I thought of Tina. Pushing Gemma's buggy along Porty Prom, must've been 20 years ago, I pointed out the floodlights at Starks Park had just come on. Riveted to a dog walker skirting the shore, she announced her greatest fear. *Quicksand*. Now another night of insomnia seemed the least of my worries.

My heartbeat increased as I slalomed in the gloom, around

puddles, seaweed clumps, and jellyfish. Last time I checked my phone it was 03:51. Another four hours or so before a sliver of red would show above Berwick Law. What the fuck would I do if I struck a sludgy patch, found myself unable to lift my feet out again? Who'd hear me screaming? Glancing around, my only company were wraith-like gulls drifting in from their roosts in the Forth.

Heading back towards the Prom, the crashing waves faded. I'd enough fresh air in my lungs. I'd make an Ovaltine, sip it while sinking into the couch, bury my nose in Val McDermid's crime scenes, Brian Eno soothing my eardrums. The combo worked sometimes. Climbing back under the duvet, I'd try not to wake Tina. She was sometimes aware of me getting up to go to the loo. You overhydrate, she'd mumble. She'd no idea I'd started going out for these walks. Explaining would mean broaching the shite going on in my head. It's *my* shite. Don't want to add it to *her* shite, with the NHS contract expiring next month. But when sleep abandons me after a few hours, my brain just switches on. Thoughts immediately churn, like the swell buckling the groynes. Imagination on overload, each daylight anxiety magnifying a hundred-fold.

Clambering up to the walkway, I stopped to spark a cigarette.

Another vice I've resumed, but only outdoors so the salty air removes the smell. The time Tina commented when gathering laundry, I blamed it on the Persy after the last match. Focusing on the clean smack of my soles against terra firma, loosening the sand, I was aware of my footsteps echoing. Altering. Someone was right behind. How'd I only become aware of them? Dark clothes? Mugger attire? Teenage memories of being jumped on the long trek along Fountainbridge after Outer Limits. My senses screamed: Go! The stomping feet were gaining. I readied to break into a run. But I also wanted to see my mystery stalker. Confront him. Inner turmoil can transform me into the Tasmanian Devil. Bunching my fists, I burled around.

He was only a boy. I recognised him. Pictured him in the lunchtime queue outside Greggs, in a Porty High prefect's blazer. Was he on something? I studied his eyes. No, the closer I examined him beneath a lamppost's stark glare, I could see tears glistening. He seemed to be waiting on my reaction.

'You alright, mate? Thought it was only me struggling to sleep the night.'

He motioned as if he was about to answer. Didn't. Instead, he looked over to the surf. Piping oystercatchers drew our attention. I waited for him to speak. Brushing at his eyes, words

struggled out. 'Not really, mister.'

I noticed his jeans, soaking up to his thighs.

'Been paddling?'

'Nup,' he mumbled.

'Well?'

A great sob funneling up from his chest, he burst into tears. 'Was going to do something really stupid.'

I felt something sparking inside me, shining a light on my own internal nonsense. 'How stupid?' But his expression panicked. 'No. Ignore that. Stupid question. What's your name, mate?'

'Josh.'

'As in Doig? Campbell.'

Almost a grin. 'Nah. As in Ginnelly.'

I nodded. 'I'm Tony.' We shook hands; his limp, ice-cold. 'I'm just at the end of Esplanade Terrace, Josh. Where d'you stay, mate?'

'Mount Lodge.'

'Least I can do is drop you off. Your jeans are soaking, eh. But you fancy grabbing a quick coffee first? Help you thaw out. My wife bought a coffee maker few weeks ago. We use it all the time. I was blaming it for keeping me up at night. But that's not the reason.'

'Oh.'

'I can talk for Scotland when I get going, Josh. But I'm a good listener.' Flicked the dowp into the ground.

After he followed me up the path, I halted by the door, touching my finger to my mouth, winking. 'Tina, my wife, can be a light sleeper. Our daughter would sleep through an asteroid strike on Inchkeith.'

Relaxing, Josh nodded. We skulked inside. Flicking on the hall light, we headed into the kitchen, blinking.

'This is, eh … Really kind of you, by the way, Tony.'

'Think nothing of it. You want a latte? Cappuccino? This gadget does the lot.'

'Eh. Can it do an Americano, Tony?'

'It'll do anything you want, mate.' Switching on the machine, I flipped open a cupboard, grasped the sack of coffee beans. 'Grab a pew, Josh. I see Gemma's headphones on the chair. She was hunting high and low for them. Just pop them on the table.'

Lifting these, he sighed but seemed to lighten up. Taking a seat, he rubbed his hands together. Focusing on the wires, he spent moments untangling them, then watched me adding coffee to the percolator. 'Ayeways have instant at home.'

'Gotta love modern gadgets, Josh.'

'What'll they think of next?'

'Who knows. One that's Bluetoothed to Alexa? *Double expresso and Sunshine on Leith.* You could ask for Hearts Hearts, Glorious Hearts with your next coffee.'

'Was thinking more of one you could shove your knob into and have it suck your balls dry.'

There was that split second when I processed what he'd just come out with. Then we were both chuckling beneath our palms, hissing hysterically, reminding me of Sparks antagonising the teacher all those years ago. As we both stifled laughter, I nodded to the machine, made a show of caressing it.

When the laughter stopped, we started talking.