

## THE LAST TIME by Jonathan Neil Smith

“I know we only met an hour ago, but I need to tell you this. When I woke up this morning, I had the idea stuck in my head that it would be the last time. Stuck, it was, like a line half-remembered from a song. For someone like me, the idea of something happening for the last time causes anxiety straight away, not excitement. You see, I need everything to stay the same. It’s part of my condition.

But the last time for what? Would October 7<sup>th</sup> be the day that the world breathed its last gasp, like a light bulb burning out? I decided, my eyes fixed on the ceiling, that an apocalypse seemed unlikely. There had been no speculation about it even on the more maverick fringes of the Internet, which some of my online friends would share. No, maybe it wouldn’t be *the* last time, it would be *my* last time. My last time to do what? As I got up, I was already fretting.

8.29 a.m., as always, I pour the cereal into a bowl. It must be the same bowl every morning, the second one from those stacked up in the cupboard. I always fill it to the second stripe that runs round the inside of the bowl. Coffee in the same mug every morning too: black, with exactly one and three quarter spoonfuls of sugar.

So you get the idea of how my life is? Everything takes much longer than it does for other people, as every action, however small, needs to be measured, timed, calculated, adjusted, rearranged, repeated. It’s the way I am.

If I have to leave the house, for instance, there’s a voice inside me nagging me to ensure that my room is exactly as I wish it to be, with everything where I can find it on my return; it demands to know if I still have my phone about me – a brief pat of the pocket is never enough; it insists that if nobody else is at home, I should check several times that the door is locked when I leave, to be on the safe side. And that’s before I even reach the bus stop. Sometimes I didn’t use to make it to school – I had to start over again if there was any glitch in my routine. Do you remember that Christmas song about Santa Claus “checking his list, checking it twice”? If it were me, it would be fourteen or fifteen times. No chance of all the presents being delivered in time for Christmas Eve.

My condition meant my getting counselling sessions, after my parents were told by the school that aspects of my behaviour were “of concern” and that despite being “bright” and “showing promise”, there were certain “issues that might stop him achieving his full potential.” And, sure enough, when the exam results came out, while my classmates were looking forward to university, I was facing re-sits. An odd phrase, don’t you think – to sit an exam? It sounds deceptively passive. You sit on a plane, sit on a bus, sit and watch a film. Let others do the work. But only I could make these re-sits happen. The scheduling was easy – second nature to someone like me, who loves things to be precisely mapped out, and if you asked me what subject I should be studying at 10.30 on Thursday morning, say, I could tell you without hesitation. The hard part was carrying it out, and not being side-tracked by the need to declutter my desktop (physical and virtual), count my pens, and devise a different method for cataloguing the books on my shelf.

Everyone from my class would be leaving soon, following their well-formed plans. I’d be left behind, loosely connected to them only by the Internet. But what could I post to remind them I still existed? Me with my girlfriend having a drink – no, I didn’t have a girlfriend. Me in my own bedsit – no, I was still living at my parents’ home. Me in a selfie – no, I’d never be able to take a photograph that looked normal enough.

And then one evening at the end of August, as I was taking my usual walk alone by the sea, it came to me. I would only post photographs of the sunset. It would show all my friends that I was still around, and some of them might actually “like” a reminder of their hometown wherever they now found themselves. And I didn’t have to be in them, either.

So it became another ritual, but one that changed according to the time of the sunset, of course. The voice inside me complained about this – why couldn’t sunset take place at exactly the same time every day, regardless? Nothing I could do about that – sorry. But as long as the sun was visible, even if it was the haziest of ghosts in the sky, I would take a picture and post it. I imposed some rules on myself, of course. For instance, I couldn’t use telephone trickery to enhance it, in the way that some people produce their selfies. I wouldn’t even change the brightness or contrast of the original image. I also decided that I had to take it from the same point each evening, which gave me away to

you, I suppose. Just past the pier, towards where the Down juts out. Where it looks like a dinosaur that fossilised because it had taken too long to haul itself out of the sea. Or so I thought as a kid.

I remember reading once, during an art history lesson, about Monet's series of paintings – cathedrals, haystacks, waterlilies - that were multiple images of the same subject but in marginally different lights, from minutely shifted viewpoints. I wondered whether he might've had the same condition as me. Like Warhol with his multiple Marylins, or Seurat with those vast canvasses formed from all those dots. How many millions of times did he dab his brush to create one painting? Again, again, again.

As I practised my sunsets, I did acquire a few skills to get a better picture. Wait for a few wisps of cloud to mask the sun a little – that created a more dramatic effect. Have something as a focal point: gulls sweeping over the sky, the distant shape of a ship moving across the horizon like an insect creeping along a skirting board. Take pictures at different stages of the process, from when the sun bleaches everything in dazzling light, to when it's just a smoulder on the horizon. The colour of the water changes, too, as it darkens from a pearly blue to purple. And as the tide shifts, that has an effect: sometimes, it recedes so far that the sea is nothing but a thin band of light, and the stretch of the beach takes up most of the picture, creased by ripple marks as if it needs ironing. Sometimes the metal struts of the pier cast diagonal shadows across the sand, so it looks as if the sun is sparkling through a reed bed. But you probably recognise all these things, as you've been following me.

I always hope the newest photograph will be better than the last. Like Monet aiming for the ideal haystack. The number of likes my photographs get has never been my priority, but I began to notice that followers of my daily posts weren't just people I knew anymore: relatives, old classmates, neighbours. There were others, strangers who intrigued me, from towns I never go to. People like you..."

I stop, look up, suddenly aware of my listener. I always do this – run away at the mouth. Either that, or I'm dumbstruck. Somehow, when putting down her cup, she's managed to spill some of the coffee, so that it forms a pool in the centre of her saucer. She instantly

takes a paper napkin from the dispenser on the table, folds it into a neat triangle and tucks it under the cup to absorb the excess liquid. She's so unruffled by this, it's almost as if she'd planned for it to happen. The voice inside me wants to express its horror, but somehow I mute it.

In response to all I've told her, she shrugs. "It's OK."

Her voice is accepting as that of a friend who is already well-used to my ways, and it seems strange that we only met an hour ago.

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It's October 7<sup>th</sup> – sunset due at 18.35. About an hour and a half before low tide. I've been glancing at the clock all day. Nothing out of the ordinary has happened, nothing to suggest that something is coming to an end. As I leave the house and head for the sea front, the prospects for the sunset are good. An intermittent breeze has peppered the sky with cloud. I make my way to my usual spot, just past the pier, towards where the Down juts out, like an emergent dinosaur.

"You're the sunset guy, aren't you? I knew I had the right view!"

She's squinting at me from under a lock of brown hair that keeps blowing in front of her face. I can't work out if her voice sounds accusing, triumphant at having unmasked me or a combination of both.

"On Instagram?"

"Err... yeah, I guess so."

"Hi, I'm a big fan. My name's Lisa, by the way. I'm a photography student in Bristol. Very impressed with your work. All just with a phone. You're a natural. Fancy a coffee?"

I'm thrown into panic by this sudden intrusion into my routine and the voice inside me takes charge. Indicating my phone and inclining my head seawards, I ask: "First, would you mind if I just....?"

"Sure."

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It's now January 7<sup>th</sup> – exactly three months since we met. Ninety-one days. Or 131040 minutes if you're counting. I'm not the sunset guy anymore. It started with a picture on October 7<sup>th</sup> of a girl – hashtag *new friend* – in a café with bland lighting, raising a cup whose sides are stained with rivulets of coffee. Raising it as if toasting my health. That appeared on my Instagram page, along with my last sunset, at least for a while.

"It's strange," I say to Lisa. "People often say that the Internet's a menace... you know, full of conspiracy theories, people trolling and bullying each other..."

"I guess so," Lisa replies casually.

"But without it I wouldn't have met you..."

She cocks her head on one side so that a lock of hair falls across her eyes, which fix on mine in a playful version of an adoring gaze. She always does this when when I get too sentimental.

"And without it I would never have thought of taking up photography. Not seriously. Now I know what I actually want to do with my life..."

She grins and nods her encouragement. She means it this time.

*(Approx 1800 words)*