

Notes to My Mother-in-Law

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

Annie, my mother-in-law lived with us for 17 years and was picture book perfect.

She washed on Monday, ironed on Tuesday. Wednesday was bedrooms, Thursday baking, Friday fish and floors, Saturday polishing, particularly the brass if it was "looking red at her," Sunday was God and sewing. She had a framed print of "The Light of the World" on her bedroom wall and her drawers were full of crochet hooks and knitting needles. She could turn the heel of a sock and the collar of a shirt. She made rock-cakes, bread pudding and breast of lamb with barley, and she would open a tin of condensed milk and hide it in the back of the fridge with a spoon in it if things were going badly in our world. She came to us when things had stopped going well in hers.

The rented cottage she left had the rose New Dawn curling over and around a front door which she never used. All of life flowed towards the back door and led into the kitchen and her cupboards full of jams and bottled fruit.

Her little parlour was all table and dresser, with a fireplace full of wild flowers in a cracked china soup tureen. She wall-papered the front room every Spring. Three walls with one pattern and the fourth to contrast. But what she most loved was her wood pile and her long narrow garden where the hedges were full of old toys and rusty tricycles. Here my children used to hide on fine summer

nights, sitting straight backed in their flannel pyjamas between rows of beans to eat furry red and gold gooseberries, rasps that weren't ripe and rhubarb dipped into an eggcup full of sugar.

All she managed to bring with her to London were two white china oven dishes, half a dozen pocket editions of Shakespeare, her button box, her silver thimble, a wooden darning mushroom, a large bundle of knitting needles tied with tape and a tiny pewter pepper-pot which became a vital prop at our mid-day planning meetings. LUNCH.

I have never been able to take lunch seriously, but for Gran it was crucial. She never took anything more than two rich tea biscuits and one mug of tea for breakfast, so around noon, depending on her chores, she would say her stomach thought her throat was cut and come downstairs. When I heard the tap of her wide wedding ring on the banister rail I would strain the potatoes.

The menu was a challenge. I'd learnt from her son that lettuce was "rabbit food". (Gran could skin a rabbit as if she was removing its cardigan). Favourites were fried cheese, Yorkshire puddings, onion gravy, dumplings, stuffed heart and kidneys cooked pink and don't make the plates too hot.

I was nervous. I had discovered garlic. I called baby marrows courgettes and pea pods mange-touts. I ate salad with a French dressing, spread marmalade on toasted cheese and there was no Bisto in the house. I often feel that food can be as big a stumbler as politics and I thought Gran and I might be incompatible in the kitchen, but when lunch was up to scratch her appreciation was so utterly delightful that the meal became a game I loved to win, planning sudden treats of stale cake, winkles eaten with a pin or fresh boiled crab.

Curious about the pretty little pewter pepper-pot, I discovered it

had come from the Blue Coat School where her father had been a cobbler. One of four children, life can't have been easy, for Gran learnt when she was very young how to pawn the candlesticks and bring her Mother jugs of beer from the Pub.

Her country life began when there was an epidemic of scarlet-fever and the Blue Coat School moved out of London. There wasn't enough work, her Father was made redundant and Gran went into service at the age of 14. She had a scar on one hand made when an irate employer biffed her with the handle of a broom she had left standing on its bristles. I loved her stories of cruel cooks and horrid housekeepers. It was like having lunch with Catherine Cookson.

In between the juicy bits we organised our days and it was some while before I realised she was just a bit, as she would say, "Mutt and Jeff". It was quite a few years before we all realised that shouting wasn't enough.

After some hilarious misunderstandings and to avoid confusion, I stuck comprehensive lists on the fridge door by a large calendar marked up in coloured crayons. It wasn't enough. Gran always said she'd rather be blind than deaf, and aware at last that she was becoming increasingly isolated, I began to write out the day's gossip at the kitchen table, putting my notes by her bed before I went to mine.

One night my husband wandered off to bed muttering darkly that I spent so much time each evening writing to Gran I could have written a book. "And illustrated it!"

Here it is.



Your suspenders were 50p. John Barnes only had pink ones. Got these up Post Office. Change on kitchen table.

The chiropodist is calling at 1.30 p.m. tomorrow (Tuesday). Inconvenient creature. We will have to lunch early and you can have a snooze when he's gone.

Pa is golfing tomorrow. Emma is going to spend the day at the Library. I think Sophie and I should be home about teatime. Lamb stew on stove. Kettle on about quarter to five? Ta.

Dear, I honestly don't think they would make a mistake like that. They only took a wax impression of the deaf ear, and that must be the one you are meant to put it in I think. Why not try Vaseline? I don't think licking it is a good idea.

I'll get some pearl-barley tomorrow Gran. Sorry about that, the kids hate it you see. It's a bit slimy. I suppose it is very good for you. There was a woman in Ardentinny who used to boil it and strain it and drink the water from it every day. I think she had something wrong with her kidneys.

The Piano Tuner is coming tomorrow at 3 p.m. so when you are dusting don't bother to put back the photos as such. He usually moves everything himself but I'm not sure if he can see terribly well. He seems never to look me straight in the eye and there is something odd about his glasses. It would be awful if he dropped Churchill. Let's give him the last of the rock cakes. I'll be home so there is no need to stay downstairs for the bell.

Dusters aren't all that expensive. Perhaps we could use that stockingette stuff the butcher sells? Don't sacrifice your bloomers in this rash manner. Heaven knows where we'll get interlocking cotton now Pontings is closed. I might try that haberdashers next to Woolworths in Hampstead. She still keeps those skeins of plaited darning wool. Last time I was in she told me she was one of the first sales ladies in John Lewis. Apparently they lived over the shop in those days in some sort of hostel which was very strictly run. She got something like 17/6 per week I think. You probably got that for a year.

Listen, we must practice. That Mr. Parnes said we must. Ten minutes every day in a carpeted room he said. Preferably with curtains. So I will come upstairs with your tea tomorrow and we will have ten minutes practice in your room. The kitchen is far too noisy.

Notes to my mother-in-law

I have to sit directly opposite you and speak slowly. As soon as you get used to my voice I'll send someone else up with tea and we'll do a few minutes longer each day. It is essential that we go about this sensibly.

You may have to hold it in your ear for the moment and I'll ring Mr. Parnes about other fitting arrangements. He agrees that the main disadvantage is the tiny switch. The tips of one's fingers do go dead after a certain age and how one is supposed to adjust the beastly thing when there is no feeling in one's fingers I can't think.

I'll mark the little wheel thing with a biro when you feel it's about right and we can adjust it before you put it in. That's settled. Practice will commence at 5 p.m. precisely tomorrow, Wednesday 9th inst., 1978.

Thank you very much Gran. I will go round to Kinston's tomorrow as they close Thursday afternoon. Is it collar you want? Or is it slipper? Green or smoked? Middle gammon is something like 84p. per lb. It'll be a great help to have something to cut cold on Saturday.

I found your splint in the hall drawer.

I tell you what I suggest. Just give up knitting for a while and see if that doesn't help. The physiotherapist I went to for my



Uncle Arthur

shoulders thought knitting was really bad for you. Especially with aluminium needles. Aluminium gets a very bad press these days. Mother has changed to enamel because she thinks Uncle Arthur is going potty. She says if you put cold water in a hot aluminium pan it pits the metal and you are swallowing chemicals with every mouthful. She says Aunt Avril used to put bicarbonate in with rhubarb and cabbage and an evil green slime used to rise to the top which was poisonous. And that's what's the matter with Uncle Arthur. I could suggest a few other things.

I didn't know Aunt Min was deaf. I thought she just had diabetes. You must ask her how she gets on with the NHS box model. Maybe the knobs are bigger. Let me put a new battery in for you. They are such wretched fiddly little things and apparently it's only too easy to leave them switched on when not in use. Mr. Parnes says one should last you six weeks, but you could have left it on overnight, and that would explain the difficulty. I had a deaf landlady when I was a student and she was forever leaving her apparatus on, when it would give piercing shrieks and she couldn't hear and we would all have to look for the box. It was nearly as big as a wireless.

If there was a thunderstorm she used to unplug herself, cover all the mirrors with dish-cloths and shut herself in the larder under the stairs. Nice woman.

Now don't forget to make a list of worries for Mr. Parnes and we will sort them all out on Friday morning. I'm afraid your routine will be very much disturbed. Let's do the floors on Saturday and the brass before we go on Friday. Variety is the spice of life as Aunt Avril used to say.

We used the wooden knitting needles for propping up the house-plants. Remember?

Nothing much of note to report. This weather will kill us all. Take

an extra pill. Be a devil. Called on Mrs. Wilson as I passed to check on her wrist. She broke it on Tuesday, did I tell you? She tripped on one of those proud paving stones opposite Number 48, and in order to stop herself from falling she put out her hand to steady herself against one of the lime trees.

"It just snapped like a twig", she said.

Being Mrs. Wilson she clattered on up the road and did the shopping before stumbling back home with a wrist like a whoopee cushion. The doctor showed her the X-ray. She says it looked like a crushed digestive biscuit.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Wilson," he said, "that you will never have a normal wrist again."

"My dear," said Mrs. Wilson, clutching my arm, "I'm deformed".

Boot has been sick under the hall table.

All set for tomorrow then? We should leave by 10.30 a.m. so we'll have to forget the brass this week. It seems very early to leave for a twelve o'clock appointment but I'm worried about the parking. Gloucester Place is one way and tremendously long as streets go, which means we'll have to go right down Baker Street to turn into it and cruise along trying to find the right number. Let's hope it's not raining but the forecast is frightful. I think the brolly is in the car.

I'll try to park as close to the house as possible, of course, but what we will have to do is to stop the car by the door and see you inside. Then while you sit in the waiting-room for a bit I'll park the car comfortably and come back to go in with you. We should have hankies in handbags and some wine gums. Also a biro for the Daily Mail crossword in case we are kept waiting. Most importantly, do not forget the box with deaf-aid, batteries old and new, and the grotty earpiece. Any change you have in your purse will likely come in handy. I think we'll need two bob bits for the meter. Lots of them.

I plan to make a slight detour on the way home to pick up fish and chips.

Apparently if I fill in the bit on the back with all the extenuating circumstances I may not have to pay so hang on to your pension for now darling.

The wee warden was very stricken. He would never have given us one if we'd got there in time but he was writing it out when I arrived and once they've started they can't stop. They have to complete the beastly thing you see because it's numbered and in triplicate or whatever and he can't destroy it, or the Authorities would run him over or something.. He's written our story on the back of this piece and I'm to do the same with mine and they will review the situation. He says we might get away with it and we are to apply for one of those orange Disable Badges. This means a visit to the doctor and the Town Hall where apparently they look

at you in case you're a fraud. We'll do it. Then we'll park on yellow lines and block bus lanes.

Our Mr. Parnes is ex-RAF, did you know?

Could you hear him or were you just pretending? You said 'yes' a lot.

I suspect him of speaking quietly to test your apparatus.

He says you mustn't wash it darling. No harm done apparently but the battery had to be replaced again. Do you remember when I washed the coffee-grinder and wrecked the engine?

We'll start the Waxol treatment tonight. He says we should use it for a week each month and I will check the ear-piece with cotton-wool and a tooth-pick.

Mr. P put a biro mark on the ear-piece and it's miles further up the wheel so it's nearly at full blast and I am going to fix it with some sticky tape as I think it is liable to slip. There is just a possibility that we may have to pad one leg of your specs.

Maybe it was a bit silly of us to leave it on in the car. It was Mr. P's idea but then he probably doesn't drive a Volkswagen. The plan is to train your ears again to accept different levels of sound. We'll start in the garden with the birds and progress to washing machines and Hoovers.

I notice that when he plays selected noises on his machine you seem to nod more often at the treble and of the scale which accounts for the fact that you can still hear me calling you for lunch.

Also I thought he was reassuring and sensible on the subject of nerves. Apparently that's why you hear the first words of a sentence and then everything fades. You have always said it was fright that stops you hearing Fred on the phone. "Hullo" is fine and then it's pure panic. It's the ability to relax and concentrate at the same time which is needed here. Good training for tight-rope walking. I always do deep-breathing when I'm nervous. It was a terrific help in my driving test but God knows what it would do to a telephone conversation.

Everything is easier in a familiar place with a familiar face. Then you can sit and relax and we must sit directly in front of you and in a good light. If you can't see someone it's very difficult to hear them.

Mrs. Wilson says that's why the Minister is difficult to hear, and he will put his hand over his mouth. Mind you he is a bit deaf himself, the church echoes and his microphone is faulty.

Mrs. Wilson says Mr. Wilson is getting deaf and she is trying to keep it from him. You are not alone. Beethoven was deaf. Did you know that? Stoners. Deaf and German. What a disaster. Quite a lot of musicians go deaf. Perhaps you think that's not so

surprising.

I'm sorry the drops hurt but I think we must persevere. I'm sure the crackling noise is the wax dissolving and moving about. I'll warm the bottle tonight. Then you can put a little bit of cotton wool in your ear to hold it in.

Mother rang to say that Mrs. Lees is laid up. She was painting the ceiling in the bathroom and she got on to a chair in the bath to do it. Makes me dizzy to think about it. Paint everywhere and severe bruising.

No, not gardening. I was burying the contents of the Hoover.

Eleanor said I was to dig a trench for the sweet-peas very early on and fill it with anything I could find. Sweet-peas are gross feeders she said. I hope they like carpet fluff, hair and bits of old Boot.

The gunge was everywhere. I took the Hoover into the yard, plugged it in with the bag off and gave some sparrows a very violent dust bath.

I remember Aunt Ella once used her Hoover like that to dry her hair. Unfortunately she used egg whites as a conditioner. She used to rinse them off with vinegar or camomile tea to bring up the colour. (She had glorious auburn curls.)

Anyway she still had the egg whites on when she bent over to switch the Hoover on and test the air-flow so she ended up with what looked like a grey fur bathing cap. We were enchanted.

Her beauty tips were legion. She used to wrap bits of lint soaked in witch-hazel and iced water round old shoe trees - the kind with a wooden toe at one end, a knob at the other and waggly metal in between - and then she would sit biffing her double chins with the padded toe and saying QX, QX, QX. Wonderful woman.

So anyway, I've buried it all. I expect the Minister's cat will dig it all up. No sooner do I turn fresh earth up, than they all waltz in and pee. He has four, you know, and I saw the big ginger one with feathers sticking out of its mouth. There's a fiendish wall-eyed Tom from the flats who dug up all my hyacinths and the banana skins under our roses.

Mother's neighbour at Ardentinnny went all round the coast to pick up a dead rat found on the beach so that she could bury it under her rose bed. They'll eat anything she says. Roses, that is.

Don't, whatever you do, put your hands into the water in the sink in the washroom. I've got pieces off the stove soaking in a strong solution of Flash. It would play hell with your Psoriasis.

I will do the fridge and oven in the morning and clean under the bath. Must get bulk buy of bleach. I gave Eleanor our last packet for her cystitis so I'll use the box for your teeth and replace it if you

don't mind?

I couldn't get Garibaldi biscuits up at Flax's and I couldn't get Min Cream. Mrs. Venning says it seems to have disappeared off the shelves.

Met Mr. Wilson up the hill today and stopped to ask after Mrs. Wilson's wrist. She is doing very well but of course he has to do the shopping for her and it hurts his poor feet. Anyway, we were happily passing the time of day when I noticed he had a little flower petal stuck to his cheek. So without thinking I put my hand up and pinched it off. My dear, it was only a piece of pink toilet paper he'd stuck on a shaving cut. I was mortified.

Talking of toilet paper, I got much the cheapest buy at the International. Quite pleased with myself and then I had to pay a fine on the Library books. They won't let you off if you are an OAP. They say they might if there were "special circumstances". They say they are human.

Which reminds me, I've had to pay that parking fine after all. Don't you think that's MEAN?

Got Garibaldi's at the International.

I know what it is Gran. It's Boot. She will eat spiders. Every so

often she has an overdose and throws up on your bed covers. It's all arms and legs. I think she eats Daddy Long Legs as well. It'll be easy to wash out and we can freshen it up outside on the first fine day.

I hoovered under out bed this morning by the way. Found the following:-

One sock, seven pence, a dod of make-up covered cotton-wool, 2 golf tees, one biro and a cardboard box of curtain rings.

Well, I don't understand it. She seems alright generally doesn't she?

When she howls like that I can't bear it. I've put a bundle of old Daily Mails in the broom cupboard so if she starts yelling try to get one under her.

She's taken all the polish off the parquet in the hall and there is an ugly stain on the tiles under the kitchen table which I just can't shift. I dread her throwing up on the carpet. We will never get the smell out. Every time the car gets hot there it is again. The unmistakable Boot pong.

Actually I apologised to Mrs. Wilson when I gave her a lift the other day and the smell turned out to be some Charantais melon she had in her shopping bag.

Drops for the last time tomorrow morning. We mustn't forget to ask the Doctor about the form for a Disabled Badge. He has to sign it.

Appointment 5.20 p.m. We'll leave on the hour.

Actually, before we leave let's write down anything you want to ask the Doctor. We mustn't waste our visit. All my symptoms fly out of the window as soon as I'm in the door.

Have you enough ointment?

Have you enough pills?

Are you still worried about your eyes?

Do you need any sweeties?

We can pass the sweet shop as we come home. Mrs. Estherson says we won't get coconut logs anymore because the Scottish firm of Fergusons in Glasgow has closed down. She says she thinks she can get us Richmond Assorted.

Mother sends love. She says the ferry was off last week because a jellyfish got stuck in the works.

Well done darling. Thank Heaven that's over and I expect you'll feel the benefit tomorrow. He says there is no infection whatsoever and just a tiny bit of inflammation from the wax. Keep a wee bit of warm cotton wool in it overnight. He says it won't affect your aid, and you can go on using it safely. Apparently the

wax has absolutely nothing to do with it.

Also it's natural for syringing to make you feel dizzy and a bit seedy. And it's natural to be scared. He wondered if you ought to have a blood test you looked so pale but I knew it was terror. Also I don't think the water was warm and he was so enthusiastic that he squirted water all over his suit. Serves him right I say. Never mind, it needed doing. I held the kidney bowl under your ear and it was spectacular. Reminded me we ought to get the chimney swept this year.

While you were recovering there I asked him about Deaf Aids and he agreed immediately to an appointment for you at the Royal Free. He says the box models are much easier for elderly people to manage because the controls are larger. It's just circulation I think. He thought we could stitch a pocket to your pinny on the bodice somewhere so the box wasn't under the table when you sat down, but I think that would muffle the microphone. He said he would certainly sign a form for our Disabled Badge. He doesn't keep them. You can pick them up at the Town Hall he says.

We are getting on! When we get one I can drive you to the Doctor's and we can park in the Finchley Road which means we won't have to gallop across the road like that. Those traffic lights don't give us half enough time to cross do they? I remember I used to find that with the pram.

Oh, and by the way, he has had a very good wheeze about your pills. You can get the same medicine in liquid form, and he says he has an idea it works quicker. It must take ages for those depth-charges to dissolve in your stomach. No more choking them

down or struggling to half them.

The Doctor said
t h o s e
l a r g e
p i l l s
should
be easier
to swallow
but mother
says Uncle Arthur keeps
a hammer in his bedroom
to smash his into little
bits. He has trouble
with his oesophagus
though. Not sure I've
spelt that correctly.

The vet says it's fur ball.
Why should she suddenly get
fur ball?

I didn't know ordinary black
bring-you-luck type cats ever
got fur ball. I thought it was
only those fluffy Persian
people. In fact Pa and I paid
£3 for a tiny bad-tempered



Persian kitten from that pet shop in Parkway when something about the lecture we had on fur ball made us go back for a refund and buy Ms Boot who was only thirty bob.

Oh well. Change of life I suppose. Apparently we have to brush her regularly. She is to be given a dose of liquid paraffin every day for a week, and then once a week as a general rule. Good grief. She seems quite to enjoy the brushing it's not too near her old scar but I don't know how to get her to take the paraffin. I put one lot in her milk and she stepped in it.

I rang the vet and he says to squeeze her jaws at the corner when she will be forced to grin and then someone can fling it down on a teaspoon. Not much success so far. We've put the liquid paraffin in the cupboard above the fireplace by the way in case we get into a muddle tho' mind you, Mother used to use it for cooking during the war. She made a wonderful orange sponge with it when we were short of fat. Everyone loved it and it was beautifully light and airy so her cousin Joan ordered one for her baby's christening, and all the baby guests loved it too, with very unfortunate results.

Funny to think of those days. It was 2 oz. Butter per person per week wasn't it? When we were staying at Granny's Flora, the maid, would put our butter ration on little dishes by our places so as to be strictly fair, but Granny used to steal bits and give it to Major Reddick, an officer who was billeted on her, and whom she adored. Us kids loathed him. He used to take his teeth out before a meal, wrap them in his khaki hanky and keep them in his pocket till he was finished when he would replace the teeth and dry his

hanky before the fire.

Frightful creature. Flora said he wore a corset. Every morning after breakfast he would rise from the table and say without fail "Let's see what the King has got for us to do today." Mother says he attacked her in the morning room and she told him she would scream for Mama.

"What's the matter with you?" he said. "Don't you like men?"

I think uniforms are bad for people.

Darling, we are all terribly sorry. Truly.

I absolutely promise we were not laughing at you, and it was all my fault. Well, it was my fault originally but then Pa started making cheeky remarks and we all got hysterical.

What happened was this:

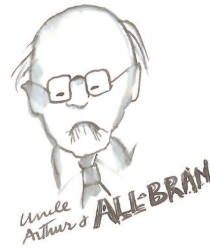
Everyone was discussing the merits of Bran for constipation. Pa said, he knew you hadn't been, but I wasn't constipated, was I, so why did I take it?

So I said, "Piles".

Well, you know I get piles sometimes, don't you? They started with Emma. Haven't had them for ages but I take Bran every day in case. It's quite fashionable.

So then I told them a dreadful story I have never told anyone before.

Last summer, when you and I were visiting Mother, I was suddenly painfully afflicted, and there was no Bran in the house. Uncle Arthur won't tolerate it. Mother has tried to give him All Bran for breakfast but he just sits there with bits sticking out of his mouth like a bad tempered bird building a nest. So anyway, I had read somewhere that a very good remedy was to put a clove of garlic up your bum. So I did. For about a week, well every night for about a week. The trick is to get rid of it in the morning, but on the day we drove back south I didn't have time to go to the loo properly and the garlic was still up there if you see what I mean.



Well, we left very early to catch the first ferry and round about the Lake District with no windows open I'm afraid I was forced to fart and the smell was simply frightful. You were vey alarmed and thought there was something wrong with the car. I told you we were passing through farmland and it was probably chemical fertiliser.

Of course, when I was telling this disgusting tale, everyone looked at you and fell about. Do you see? I know you thought we were laughing at you, but really we were laughing at me and I somehow couldn't get you to hear and Pa was being very wicked and making matters worse.

Please forgive me. I hope you believe we would never talk about you to your face and laugh like that. It's just so impossible when there are a lot of people at table to persuade everyone to talk one at a time and of course your box picks up all the cutlery noise.

It must be horrible for you. I am so sorry. We'd all hate it if you didn't come down to meals darling. Please don't do that.

Mrs. Wilson is fine now, but a bit stiff. Mr. Wilson drove to Glastonbury last week and brought her back some Holy Water in a petrol can.

She is keen to stick her wrist in that shrine somewhere near Sidmouth. There's a sort of hole in a bit of stone and you put the injured limb through it and pray to some saint. Saint Monica or somebody it could be. Anyway, it's a woman.

Gran, have you seen a set of keys anywhere?

Not this Tuesday, darling. Next Tuesday. Sorry, sorry, sorry. It was Sunday when I said it and I meant not this Tuesday coming but next Tuesday, i.e. the Tuesday in the week following next Sunday. O curses, it's one of those misunderstandings like the pronunciation of scone, and whether a crumpet is a big flat dark

thing with holes in it or a wee fat white thing with holes in it or whether treacle is syrup or the other way round or neither. How long were you sitting with your feet in a bowl?

Mother is in a frantic state. You know the stray cat I told you about? Well, not only did it give Uncle Arthur asthma but it started to get some sort of discharge from its ears so she took it to the vet and he advised her to have it put down. He said it would be kinder to do it at once so she left it with him and came home. Now of course Ada tells her that the Doctor has lost his tabby and is searching the coast.

My dear, she may have murdered the Doctor's cat.

Nothing to report.

Dad used some of your psoriasis cream on that rough patch on his shin and it's gone. Brilliant.

The Minister's wife came home from a late Thursday bulk shopping trip and dropped a bottle of whisky and six eggs whilst unloading.

No, nobody was hurt. It's just that whisky costs £6.98.
