

My Cheri Amore

As the car left Carlisle, Brian floored the pedal, glad to be heading into true countryside. The 1967 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud sped onwards, heading for Peebles Hydro where he and Avril would do two, forty-minute spots, singing with "The Silvertones Big Band Sound". It was another forties and fifties dance weekend with the participants all trying to outdo each other, dressed in period clothing. Beside him, Avril was trying to get a word into the mobile phone conversation. He smiled, pleased it was not being relayed on his new Bluetooth speakers.

'Sorry, Tina, this line is breaking up. Avril placed her finger over the red phone symbol. 'I think. . . .' She pressed, disconnecting. 'God, Brian, 42 minutes and she was still going round in circles. Poor girl, she's lost the plot. Of course, Brian, Tina's years older than me. Your Archie will need to get her into a home soon. It's the least he can do after all those years of happy marriage. Poor dear.'

Brian raised an eyebrow. Avril and Tina had been in the same class at school together, two years ahead of him at Langside Primary School.

'Better switch it off before she gets you on redial.'

'Good idea. Can I use your phone? I want to check on Martha, see if she is available.'

Brian stifled a groan. Martha, the third member of the unholy trio. His ex-wife was still chipping away at him, even after five years. She had got the house in Newton Mearns, half of his 'worldly goods' and he had got the car, his prized possession. Now he lived in retirement with his friend Archie in his sandstone villa in Newlands, where the car was normally parked in a huge triple garage beside Archie's two cars, a Porsche and a Mini Cooper, both soft tops.

Brian had been friends with Archie since schooldays, sitting side by side all through primary, separated only when Archie was sent to Fettes College in Edinburgh, destined to become a property developer. In their early twenties, both Brian and Archie had married their sweethearts, a double wedding, each the other's Best Man. When their marriages had ended, Brian and Archie had 'found' each other, restarting their lives free to express their inner selves at last.

As they travelled to Peebles, Brian's sister-in-law Avril was trying to finalise a group of singers for a charity event she was calling a "Golden Oldies' Singalong", this on the following weekend in Glasgow's City Halls. This gig was in aid of St Margaret's Hospice in memory of her husband Stephen, Brian's younger brother.

'Martha, I'll put you on speaker, Brian's driving, I just . . .'

'My Brian? You're in the Roller, right? That car should have been mine, Brian. I looked after it like the child we never had, all those years when Avril and Stephen

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took you away from me, on your endless cruise shows with that wee rat of a brother of yours, Tommy and his Silvertones. It's mine, Brian. That car is mine. D'you hea. . .'

Brian hit the recently installed Bluetooth button hidden under the dashboard. Martha ranted on, into the uncaring ether.

'Avril, switch it totally off, please. Thanks. You do realise this call will generate days of abusive text messages.'

'But Brian, Martha is a brilliant singer. And now she's free of looking after her mother, well . . .'

'OK, Avril. Here's the deal. If you get Martha, you'll need to find a replacement for me.'

'But, Brian. The hall's booked and Tommy and his Trio from the Silvertones have booked it into their diary. We need another female voice. I can't do the whole show on my own, can I? Not with my throat!'

'What about the girl from the Jazz Choir, Leela?'

'She's Romanian, Brian. A refugee! No, Brian. She's half our age! What would she know of our repertoire? And she's an amateur!'

'Actually, She's from Motherwell. Her mother was Latvian, her father is Scottish. And she is a great singer, yes? We all had to start somewhere, yes? And she stood in for Frank on the piano that time at the Jazz Choir. You have to admit, Avril, Leela is very accomplished.'

'But Brian, she's blind!'

'Yes, so? She works with Guide Dogs for the Blind, as a final assessor, actually, before the dogs get assigned.'

'Does she? How do you know so much about her?'

'We had a coffee. Check the glove compartment. I wrote her mobile number on the back on one of my cards.'

'She was in this car? With a dog? No wonder my hay fever is acting up. You know I'm allergic to dogs, don't you?'

'Well, yes, but no, no dog; we always leave Marigold at home. Anyway, I used Archie's Mini.'

'Who's Marigold?'

'Her dog under assessment.'

'So, you met her for coffee, did you? Was this a date? You picked her up from her house? Where does she live?'

'Tantallon Road.'

'But Brian, I live in Tantallon Road.'

'Yes, Leela's two closes along from you. Same close as Lynne and Frank. She's quite pally with them, actually.'

'Brian, how long has this affair been going on, right under my nose?'

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'It's not an 'affair', it's a friendship, that's all. She's great fun, actually. And she's a great cook too. She came out to ours and cooked her special lasagne for us. Archie said it was the best food he's eaten in years. No, Avril, Leela and I, it's a friendship, yes? She comes round to our place and we eat; she plays and we sing, just the three of us.'

'Oh, what do you sing?'

'Just the usual stuff, you know. She's brilliant at "Puppy"¹, actually.'

'But Brian, that's mine! You know I love that song.'

'But she *is* good at it, gets all the high notes spot on. Brilliant, actually. She went down a treat at "The Redhurst".'

'You've been singing with her professionally? If you get caught, you'll lose your card.'

'No, no. It was an open mike evening. She won first place.'

'With "Puppy", with my song?'

'No, she did that for her second encore. She won with "Cheri Amore"², actually. Quite appropriate, don't you think?'

'Oh, Brian, you know I love that song too. At least she didn't sing "Speedy"³ did she?'

'Ah. . . Well. . . Actually, that was her first encore.'

'Brian Silver, you bloody, bloody traitor. How could you! My three most favourite songs and you coached her. Martha was right about you all along. You *are* a rat, just like just like your brother Tommy.'

'Ah, look, here we are. Time to gird our loins, Avril. Peebles Hydro, here we come. How's your throat feeling?'

'I'm fine! How many times do I have to answer the same question? My throat is fine.'

'Great. Let's find Tommy and get set up for a rehearsal and sound check.'

'You go on, Brian. Leave me your keys. I'll try Celia.'

'Right. But use your own phone, please. And whatever you do, do not give Celia my number.'

'Brian, it's not Celia's fault. She's so lonely, now her Alfie has gone to heaven with my Stephen. She thought you fancied her.'

'Did you not tell her about Archie and me?'

'Yes, but she's a bit old-fashioned. She thinks you're just friends.'

¹ (*It's only*) "Puppy Love", 1960, written by Paul Anka.

<https://youtu.be/NAtwI2poXXq>

² "My Cheri Amore", 1969, written by Stevie Wonder.

<https://youtu.be/NW0YcO5P3OM>

³ "Speedy Gonzales", 1962 by Pat Boone with Mel Blanc

<https://youtu.be/YRtwJSCxtQY>