

Shoppers' Paradise

Frank Carmichael sat on the bus, his shopping bag at his feet, heading for his regular Monday outing to Shoppers' Paradise. The young couple behind him had been at his bus stop and their argument continued unabated, recycling, going nowhere. Frank, a veteran of two failed marriages judged their spat was now in its final stages.

'Listen Angela, please. How many times dae I huv to say it? It wiz an effin accident. It wiznae ma fault. The guy reversed oot of his driveway wi'oot lookin. Ah'll get it sorted by Friday, Sunday at the latest. Wee Tommy sayed he wud make it like new fur ye, OK?'

This voice was local, somehow familiar. Frank had no idea who they were, only that the girl was tall and well-made, the boy smaller, thinner. In the bus shelter the boy had been vaping, filling the air with white steam clouds of sweet, strange-smelling smoke. Frank had edged sideways to the upwind corner.

'No, not OK Eric Connelly. You are always deh-same, every time you borrow mey-car, something happens and it's never, ever yeh-fault, is it? But I know better this time, don't I, 'cos I was bloody there. And mey-wrist hurts like bloody hell. You must have been doing nearly fifty en-issah twenty zone. Mey car's a right-off. How-mey going to get to work on time without mey-car?'

The girl's voice was nearly local with an undertone, maybe African like the woman at the check-out in the SuperSavers.

'Look, Ah've sayed Ah'm sorry. Whit mair de ye want me to say?'

Silence followed and then the girl spoke into her mobile phone:

'Hello, dey-sis Angela Henderson, from Electricals. Can you get eh message to Mrs Galbraith, please, to tell her I'm going to beh late diss-morning? I've been in an accident, with mey car.'

'Yes, OK, no worries, I'm on dey-bus.'

'Whit-izzit?'

'She's wanting to speak to mey. Oh, Mrs Galbraith, Angela Henderson here, I've been ...'

'Oh, but I . . .'

'Angela, whit did she say?'

'She said I'm fired. She said I knew I was on mey last warning. Mey Mum will go ape-shit. She said she was sick of mey borrowing from her so how em I going to pay the instalments of the car without a job.'

'Don't worry, Angela, Ah've got a wee idea.'

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The lady driver called out: "Shoppers' Paradise, next stop. Have a nice day!"

Frank leaned forward and pressed the bell, rose and shuffled forward to alight for the recently refurbished 1970's shopping centre. Without warning, a white van stopped in front of the bus, the driver braked hard and the queue of passengers lurched forward.

Frank felt a sharp pain in his ribs.

'Sorry, auld yin. Loast ma balance. Here's yur bag, there ye ur, a' sorted. Here, let me help you aff the bus. Cum oan Angela, let's get aff here and catch the bus back, OK?'

An hour later, with his trolley well filled, Frank joined the line of others waiting in the 'shoppers' assist' lane. The lady behind had apologised when her trolley nudged his bottom, accidentally. He had squinted through his better eye, saw her smile and smiled back. Somehow her face seemed familiar but this was a recurring theme since macular degeneration had reduced his sight to limited peripheral vision.

When he was three from the front, the check-out operator changed. Recognising her outline and distinctive twang, Frank was immediately on edge: it was the impatient woman who scanned at lightning speed and revelled in her nick-name, "Gloria the Q-Buster". Over time, by listening as Gloria burred to other shoppers, Frank had learned this large, busty woman was originally from Nigeria and had come to Wishaw with her then husband, an oil worker. Discovered piece by piece, Frank now knew Gloria was divorced, had two children, her "wundehfull son" at university studying to be a doctor and a troublesome daughter who worked in Debenham's in Glasgow. Gloria's ex was remarried and lived in Aberdeen. His new wife Monica "was eh thin, stuck-up bitch wid brown teeth". Despite their long-ago divorce, Gloria had recently confided to a woman she seemed to know well, "mey Damien, he still good to me. He take me to High-beeza wid him last year when he tell dey bitch he off-shore".

After a short wait, it was Frank's turn, and a trainee called Evangelista took charge loading the belt for him as he fumbled to find his wallet and get his credit card ready. Although he was sure he had zipped his wallet into his right-hand anorak pocket, only after several checks through every pocket did he admit defeat. His wallet was missing.

'I'm very sorry, Gloria, I seem to have lost my wallet. I did have it when I got on the bus to come here, but it's gone, with my travel concession card and credit card too.'

'Hey, old man, you know dey rules. No money, no shopping, Right? Hangee, you run eh get dey manager come end void diss-sale and I unpack his bags. Oh, and tell Sammy et security to check him out. Deese old guys is always at et, stealing stuff dat esn't tagged. Last week Sammy got one old guy wid six fillet steaks shoved en heys-anorak.'

From behind Frank a voice intervened: 'Excuse me, that will not be necessary, thank you. I will pay for my friend's shopping. Excuse me a moment, Frank.'

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Frank felt a firm hand in the small of his back and moved forward with his trolley as the woman slipped her card into the machine and entered the code. He noticed the woman's shopping was already on the belt. She seemed to be fit and fully mobile so why was she using the much slower 'shoppers' assist' lane when she could have self-scanned her small shop?

'Thank you, Gloria and may I have £100 cash-back, please?'

'No way, deh-limit's £20.'

'Oh, well, that will have to do for the moment. Is there a bank cash machine nearby?'

'Outdey, 'side deh-betting shop.'

'Thank you, Gloria. And thank you too, Evangelista, very well packed.'

While this exchange was happening, Frank was racking his brain, trying to figure out who this slim, smartly-dressed woman was.

'Right, Frank Carmichael, did I spot a Costa Coffee upstairs?'

'Look, first, thanks for helping me out. I'll pay you back as soon as I can. I think I might have been pick-pocketed. Or maybe I've dropped it as I got off the bus.'

'Don't worry Frank, I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of it soon.'

'Look, you seem to know me but I'm sorry, I've no idea who you are.'

'I'm Ann, Ann Somerville, as was. Remember, our third year at St Philomena's, before we moved to England. You took me to the Christmas dance, bought me a box of chocolates and a charm bracelet with six nativity ornaments on it. I'm sure I still have it, somewhere. Do you remember, back then when you were rich compared to everyone, with your job on the lemonade lorry? Remember you gave once gave me two extra bottles of Dandelion and Burdock for free because it was my favourite?'

Frank's memory of Ann Somerville was vague at first then came back in a in a rush although the details remained elusive.

(Uncle) Willie McHugh, the Alpine driver, was a friend of Frank's father from the War. Willie's own father had been a rag and bone man and there was a decrepit horse in the field beside his rickety cottage where the large panel van was parked. This van was used to sell soft drinks round the houses at the weekends. Frank had done this job from the age of twelve until he left school aged fifteen, earning good money and tips, sometimes bringing home as much as his father did for his job with the cleansing department.

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The McHugh's cottage was on the edge of the council estate where Frank and Ann lived. His parents long dead, Willie had lived alone with two huge Alsatians which went everywhere with him. Willie also worked part-time in a petrol station owned by his cousin. From Sunday night, the van lay idle and empty until Friday evenings when Willie and Frank made three trips round trips to the bottling plant in Blantyre to collect supplies and then on Sunday night further three-round trips to return the empties. Willie had paid Frank an extra 5/- a week for this loading duty. In addition, with a sly wink, he had allowed Frank to borrow the van keys on condition he swept it out and washed it before Friday.

'Here, Frank, let me get this bag of mine into your trolley. There we are. That's it, at your own pace. Here, grab hold of my arm. No rush at our time of life, is there? So, Francis Carmichael, you don't remember me? We'll sort it all out over a coffee. Fancy sharing a slice of carrot cake? Tell you what, you have a wee seat over there by the lift and I'll pop these bags downstairs into my car and get right back to you, OK?'

The van had been a secret, dry place to take girls and Ann had been one of many girls he had enticed to his boudoir with increasing success as he perfected his technique. As he remembered it now, he had been making good progress with Ann Sommerville when she had moved with her father's job. Shortly after leaving school and still trying to juggle his day job as an apprentice roofer/slater with his weekend earner, Frank had become involved with Agnes Docherty, the girl who had become his shotgun wife, married in the privacy of the chapel house, both aged sixteen.

In the coffee shop Frank learned about Ann and her life, a first telling, an outline only.

Her father, a metallurgy technician, had moved the family to Corby on a promotion and promise of a larger house. After school, Ann had gone to Bath University before joining the NHS as Clinical Psychologist. At university, she had been in various choirs where she had met the man who became her husband. Kristof Marek (Kris) was from a family of Czech origin. On graduating as an Accountant, he had joined HSBC (Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation). They had travelled widely, as Kris moved from country to country, before settling in Hong Kong at HSBC headquarters as a senior member of the International Management Division. Kris's sudden death in 2001 had knocked Ann sideways and she had returned to the UK, to live in Dartmouth, visiting Scotland to see her two older sisters and a cousin who still lived in Wishaw.

'So, Frank, now you know my story, what about you? I heard you married Agnes Docherty.'

'Ah, well, yes, Agnes. I'm not proud of that episode. We were both too young, far too young. Least said, soonest mended. She brought the two girls up alone, married a guy from Glasgow and moved to stay with him and his mother, to work in the mother's fancy

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hair and beauty business. They tell me our daughters Evelyn and Noreen have recently taken over the business and are doing well. I still send Christmas and birthday cards, but they don't respond. Why should they? They don't really know me, do they?'

'My cousin Jennifer said you joined the Army, is that right?'

'No, the Royal Marines. Best thing I ever did, I reckon, except for the guilt over jumping ship on Agnes when Noreen was on the way. Look, we were living with her parents and her father was a pig of a man. There was a lot of heavy drinking at weekends and everyone smoked, which I hated. I was eighteen and still a raw boy, arguing and even fighting with him when he got drunk. I felt trapped. Anyway, enough of my excuses. They say the Marines make men out of boys and I would say it worked for me. You said you were in Hong Kong. I was there for nine years, in the Royal Marines' band.'

'Were you there in 1997, Frank, at the handover ceremony?'

'Yes, I was in the band, at the Convention Centre. We were introduced to Prince Charles backstage. I have a photograph somewhere.'

'Then I must have seen you! Kris and I were on the podium at the Convention Centre as guests of the British Embassy, right in the front row. Kris was very close with Chris Patten. And the first of July 1997 was my big birthday too. It seemed so horrible to be fifty, I tried not to think about it. Ah, how ideas change. I would be very pleased to be fifty nowadays.'

'So, Ann, after the handover, did you stay on in Hong Kong?'

'Only for a year. We moved to Brunei with Kris's job, when he became a director. It was a big step up for him and the pressure was enormous. I'm sure it's what killed him in the end. During these years he never seemed to be at home, jetting away almost every week, sometimes all the way to the London then from there to Los Angeles and then to Brisbane and back to Hong Kong then home. He was nearly ten years older than me but always seemed so fit, jogging and at the gym every day. He was in Auckland when he died of a heart attack and I was stuck in Brunei. It was a hellish blow and a logistical nightmare trying to get his body back to London. I just wanted home as quickly as possible. Kris and I had been planning retirement and had bought ourselves a beautiful little villa overlooking the River Dart, with a good view of the Royal Naval College. When he died, it was a no-brainer: I just upped sticks, moved to Dartmouth and tried to wipe out the loss with my hobbies, singing, learning to play piano and golf. I'm part of a group of friends interested in jazz and we do gigs. I'm their singer. It's just a hobby, we give the fees to our charity, The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust.'

The girl clearing the tables interrupted them but, as the place was nearly empty, they sat on.

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'So, what about you, Frank? They closed the Stonecutter Island base, didn't they?'

'Yeah. They were keen to get shot of us older ones and I took the bait and signed myself out on a deal, taking a lump sum in lieu of my pension. At the time, I was married to a local girl and, with a few mates we decided to set ourselves up as a jazz quartet with Honey as our singer. We were making a good living during that first year, travelling all over the Far East, even to Brunei once.'

'Honey was your wife?'

'No, April was my wife. Honey was her youngest sister. There were five girls in the Hung family and Honey was the oldest. I suppose I should have seen it coming but Honey and April were very persuasive. Their uncle had an import/export and he needed a co-investor to buy stock from a safe source he had in China.'

'And?'

'OK, another tale of woe but you did ask. Well, soon after I put the money into the business it all went pear-shaped. We had been on tour for about three weeks. I woke up in a hotel in Kuala Lumpur to discover April had done a bunk without paying her hotel bill. Then I discovered my bank and credit cards had been blocked. With the little cash I had and help from my mates, I made it back to Hong Kong. When I got to our apartment, it was occupied by another family. I checked with my bank and yeah, Honey and April had cleaned me out. As you'll know, Hong Kong can be a difficult place to find someone if they want to hide, especially if you don't speak Cantonese. The best I could discover was the entire Hung clan had moved to Shanghai. Losing the money was bad enough but the worst part was losing my two kids. Thomas was four and Penny was two. They were lovely kids and to be fair, April was a great mum to them. After a few months I gave up looking and came back home.'

'So, Frank, are you on your own now, like me?'

'In a way, yes. I live with my sister Marleen and her husband Nigel. He was a policeman and when he retired they started a florists' business in Wishaw. After a few years, they opened a second shop in Hamilton and now they're looking for another place, maybe in Bothwell or Motherwell. I used to do deliveries and odd-jobbing for them until my eyesight went. Do you know, Ann, I was stupid, really, really stupid. I knew there was something wrong with my eyes but I kept putting it off. One day, I was driving along with Marleen in the passenger seat and suddenly she was screaming at me to stop. I stood on the brakes, thinking it was a child but then I found out I had almost driven into construction skip. I went for the tests but after toing and froing here, there and everywhere, they told me I was too late, my macular degeneration had gone too far. If I had acted earlier, even only a few months sooner, they might have been able to help me. But I count myself lucky because I can see a little if I squint to the side. My main interest

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is music and I teach saxophone two afternoons a week in local primary schools. I can still play golf with my pals who spot the ball for me.'

'Are you still in a jazz group?'

'I was but when the MD was diagnosed, I dropped out. They're a good bit younger than me and try to make a part-time living out of it so having an almost blind guy is too much of a liability. Anyway, they have two new players so don't need me.'

'Well, Frank, can I run you home?'

'Are you sure, I could get a taxi? Ah, maybe not, since I'm skint.'

'Right, then Royal Marine Bandsman Carmichael, Sommerville's taxi it shall be.'

When they arrived at the house, Marleen's van was in the driveway so Frank invited Ann in to meet her.

'Oh, there you are Frank!' said Marleen. 'I was worried about you. A young couple came to the shop an hour ago and handed in your wallet. They found one of my business cards in it. I was expecting a phone call from you. Did you know your mobile is off?'

'I forgot to take it with me. It's on charge in my bedroom, I think.'

'Anyway, the girl, her name is Angela, seems very nice and it turns out she's looking for a job so I've given her a start and put her alongside Mary Sweeney in Hamilton for a trial period. I'm not so sure of her boyfriend. Maybe he's a rough diamond. He says he has a clean driving licence, so I might take him on too, for deliveries. I've asked him to bring in his license. I'll get Nigel to run a check on it, and see if he has a police record. Sorry, I should have asked, who is your friend?'

'Marleen, this is Ann Marek, Ann Sommerville as was. Do you remember her from St Philomena's?'

'Nice to meet you, Ann. Do you have a brother Robert?'

'Yes, Robert lives in Canada now. He was a Royal Canadian Mountie but has now retired.'

'Send him my best wishes. He was my boyfriend until you moved away to England. Funny, I seemed to be destined to marry a policeman!'

'I will, I Skype him most weeks and he's planning a trip back to Scotland soon, so you'll get a chance to meet him.'

'And you and our Frank, I seem to remember you two were an item as well, yes?'

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'Yes, so long ago but it seems like yesterday,' Ann chuckled. 'As soon as I spotted him going into Shoppers' Paradise, it all came flooding back. He's hardly changed a bit, not really. Frank was my first real boyfriend and when Dad took us all away to Corby I cried my eyes out for weeks.'

'So, Ann, have you two had a chance to have a chat, have you?'

'Yes, we've had a lovely time, thanks. Really nice. Turns out we have quite a bit in common.'

'There you are Frank, I think you've clicked again! Well, big brother, you get the shopping unpacked and put the kettle on while Ann and I catch-up.'