

Best Served Cold

'How long do you stopover in Perth, please?'

'Aye, missus, forty-three minutes. If Ah'm oan time, that is.'

'It's just that I want to come straight back. I've a dress rehearsal tonight.'

'Aye missus, Ah'll get ye there oan time, nae worries, eh?'

'Thanks.'

'Dae ye need a haun', wi' that rucksack?'

'No, thanks. It's not that heavy, just bulky.'

She scolded herself: *"Why do I have to ask when I have all the information from their website? It's always the same; no matter how much I rehearse, I'm always nervous before a performance. It makes me talkative. And drawing attention is the last thing I want."*

It was atypical November weather, warm, sunny, too hot for the huge but well-worn Barbour jacket and winter clothing in the rucksack, borrowed from the theatre group's wardrobe. This worried her, but the forecast for Perth was for heavy rain and a cold wind, more suited to her planned disguise.

The bus drew out of Glasgow's Buchanan Bus Station at just after eleven o'clock. Her mind was racing, checking it all again. Their shop's website had revealed their depleted stock; their Facebook page had boasted their plans, giving all the details.

Uncertain, she began a debate with herself: *"The driver might remember me. Perhaps I'll come back by train - that might work. Or I could return via Edinburgh, and just miss the rehearsal."* Now that the moment had arrived, it was hard to think straight. No, she decided; best to stick to the first plan. It depended on boldness, all of it.

She hardened her heart: *"Imagine reneging on her own mother, just because she missed a few weeks' payments because her husband was dying of cancer? How could any woman do that to her own parents? And he was no better, cow-towing to the snide bitch's every whim, leaving me six months pregnant, already swelling like a barrage balloon, running away with that thin bitch to share in her blood money."* They deserved what was coming to them, the conniving bastards.

Calmer now, she smiled, controlled her breathing, ran over her lines. Of course she knew she would have to ad lib, but the best modern theatre was like that, avant-garde. All she had ever wanted to do was act. Now at last her degree in Chemical Engineering had found a useful purpose. Even though she had hated it from the start; her father

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had insisted she continue, despite her condition, making her do the extra year to get her First Class Honours, a qualification she had never used.

The old rebuke sprang to her mind: *"I should have done it when Auntie Morag died, heartbroken, deserted by her only daughter, leaving me to pick up the pieces, leaving me to hold them all together."*

But back then she had her own kids to think about; and Alec, before he walked out ten years later with his rich floozy from the Italian class and skived off to live in Lucca, leaving her in the lurch for a second time. *"If it hadn't been for Dad, I would've sunk without trace."*

Now her father was gone too, like his sister and her own mother. Now, twenty-three years on, she was free of them at last. Timing was everything.

ooOoo

At the bus terminal she sped to the toilet, locked herself in a cubical, hung up the mirror and did her make-up, including the realistic moustache, goatee beard and bushy eyebrows. She put on the bulky life preserver then shrugged into the Barbour, stuffed her short hair up inside the deerstalker and put on the thick-rimmed glasses. Walking through the lashing rain with her head down against the CCTV street cams, she practised her deep manly voice.

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The shop had been quiet all morning, because of the weather. The gas boiler had failed again, and no matter how much he had cajoled it, poked and prodded it, it remained unresponsive. After he left to join his wife, the service cupboard door swung open.

They sat side by side in the back shop, huddled around the noisy fan heater. The air was thick with chain-smoked cigarettes.

'Shall I make us another coffee, Frank?'

'No, thanks, Angela, I'm zinging with it already; how about a cuppa-soup?'

'OK, let me see, Tomato or Golden Vegetable?'

'Any Oxtail?'

'No, Frank, I just told you, only Tomato or Golden Vegetable.'

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'OK, Tomato then, thanks.'

'Do you mind if I have the Tomato, you take the Golden Vegetable?'

'No, no, of course not, Angela. Look, leave it for me. I nip along to Greggs and see what they have, OK?'

'No, Frank. For goodness sake, you know I can't stay in the shop alone, not after the robbery.'

'Oh yes, sorry, Angela, sorry. Look, leave it for me, Angela, I'm fine, really.'

'Right, Frank, two strong blacks coming up.'

'Excuse me, is there anyone here?'

'Oh, sorry sir. Just checking the stock in back. How can I help?'

'You know it's not on. I've been waiting at this counter for ages.'

'Yes, sorry sir. Now, how can I help?'

'Do you have chest waders in my size?'

'Mmm. Maybe. Are you a 48"?''

'No, bigger, that's the problem. 56" and I'm a size 8 in the foot, allowing for socks.'

'Give me a minute, sir, will you please? I'll need to check our upstairs store room.'

'Oh Angela dear, this gentleman is waiting while I try upstairs. All right, dear?'

'Frank, no. I'll go. What is it you want?'

'The customer is looking for chest waders, 56" chest, size 8 foot.'

'No, we sold the last pair of chest waders in early September. You see we're running down our stock, heading for retirement. Did you not see that the shop is up for sale? Tenerife here we come. No more wet cold winters for us. No more wet summers either, come to think of it.'

'Oh, I see. I'll just have to try Edinburgh, I suppose.'

'Or go online, that might be best. That's what we do ourselves. Frank, get him one of our cards.'

'Oh, thanks.'

'Yes, that's our website. We'll be closing up for good at lunchtime, and moving this stuff to our garage, clearing it out on eBay.'

'Oh, right.'

'Well, goodbye, sir. Oh, since you are probably our last customer ever, help yourself to a fly box. Salmon or Trout?'

'Do I look like a Trout man?'

'No, sorry, sir. Salmon it is. Worth thirty-five pounds, is that box. Our compliments; sorry to have kept you waiting. Bye-bye, sir. Oh dearie me, what a terrible day for you.'

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'Frank, what the hell are you playing at? D'you think we're made of money? How many times do we have to go over this?'

'But Angela, now we've got the house sold at last, we'll have nearly eight hundred thousand, and then there is the shop to sell. That solicitor guy is pretty hopeful, isn't he? It's in a great location, just not for a fishing tackle shop, not nowadays, with the internet.'

'Frank Minnis, do NOT lecture me. I've had quite enough of that. Just remember, we're in this together.'

'OK, OK, Angela. I know. I could never have done without you. And I know, your father was dying anyway, and your Mum, was well, let's leave it, please. And I know, Angela, as you say, the hungry hoards from Drumchapel would have chewed through it in weeks.'

'And so would you, Frank Minnis. If it had not been for me being careful, you would have squandered that lottery money in a few months, with your grand ideas. And was it a good move to get away from them, to move us here to Perth, where they never found us? And who was it that found this business, eased the old bugger out? So, remember, Frank Minnis, *penny wise and pound wiser*. Now, say "Sorry Angela" and let's put it behind us.'

'Sorry Angela. Sorry. OK? Right. Right. Well, Angela, what do you say? Shut the door on them and cash up or what?'

'Yes, Frank. Time for *us* at last. Go on, shut the buggers out.'

'Yes Angela, when we get to Tenerife we can relax, do our own thing, forget the past, right?'

'No, sorry, sir, we're closing.'

'Dammit, man, it's only twelve fifty-seven. It says here you are open until one o'clock on Wednesdays. What sort of business is this?'

'A business that's closing, sir, sorry.'

'Closing, no, no! Don't you *dare!* Open that door, at once. You rude bugger.'

The bolts slid fast and Frank laughed quietly to himself, ignoring the angry thumps on the door. No more cow-towing to the pompous rich, or even the pompous poor. Angela was right. Angela was always right.

'Open bloody up! Do you hear me in there? Bloody nonsense. Twaddle. I demand to be served. If you do not open that door I'll. . .'

The explosion lifted the florid Rt. Hon. Torquil MacKinven off his feet and hurtled him across the empty precinct into the outside seating area of the café opposite.

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He had been shaken but not stirred, he chortled to his dinner party friends over the weeks to come. A police youngster had trailed him to hospital but Torquil could offer no information of value.

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The bus rolled into Glasgow twelve minutes late. Only then did she allow herself to chuckle: *"Total cost - less than thirty pounds. The design was simple, all on the internet, everything available from B&Q and Maplin Electronics. After all, there is no point studying chemical engineering if you didn't get some benefit from it!"*

Travel cost - nothing, due the 'Jack McConnell' concession card. They never looked at the face on the card, she had noticed.

The urge to share her triumph was eating at her but she fought it down. She would donate the fly box to the Marie Curie charity shop.

'Thank you driver, you must be exhausted.'

'Aye, missus. Uch, bit ye get used tae it, so ye dae. Oh, an' don't forget yer big rucksack, missus.'

'Oh thanks, silly me.'

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At home, she used secateurs to chop the concession travel card into tiny pieces, before wrapping them in tissue paper and flushing them down her toilet.

The card had belonged to her neighbour two doors along and still had two years to run to expiry. A pity to destroy it, she thought, but she had read that these cards contained an electronic lozenge that enabled tracking software.