
LUMINA

ERRAN LAWRENZI COLLEGE



GREYSVILLE

Tanya Frank

MUM USED TO leave the door open when she went to the toilet, and each month I would spy the thick wedge of her Dr. White's sanitary pad, stained with red-brown period, as it sat exposed in the crotch of her big knickers. The knickers had holes in them, tiny perforations that were oddly enough meant to be there. The pad was hoisted into place with a belt-like contraption. My brother Sam made the mistake of screaming once when he saw the scene rather than just swallowing hard, which is what I did. This presented Mum with the idea of chasing us with the offending article. She called it her jam rag and laughed at our squeals of disgust, thrilled that she had found a novel way of punishing us.

I knew not to talk about this, in the same way that I knew to keep quiet about what my stepdad Bert did on those nights out "up the road," as he called them.

It was grey up the road and it was grey where we lived, different tones of it, but grey nonetheless. Mum didn't seem to mind it too much. She kept herself busy by popping to the neighbors' for cups of tea.

"Ooh ooh," she called through the letterbox. "It's only me. Put the kettle on."

Later she traipsed back home with Skinny Doreen from St. Alban's Tower or Dobby Linda from Devon Court, bringing with her a fine cloak of smog from the North Circular Road. It stunk and brought on asthma attacks. My brother Sam got them all the time, whereas Bert, my stepdad, only got them when he was nervous.

Once inside our flat, Mum and the neighbors gossiped and smoked Players Number Ten in the kitchen at the yellow Formica-topped table. The cats did their business under that table, scrabbling around in a litter tray.

"For Christ's sake, Shirl," Bert shouted one night when the cats' frantic scratching in the litter got too noisy to ignore. "Can't you put that bloody thing somewhere else? It's putting me off me supper."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Bert," Mum said. "Where else can they go with us living ten floors up in the air?"

Bert didn't answer her. He hardly spoke to her anymore. He ate his supper off a tray in front of the telly in the living room and he stayed there the whole evening, moving closer and closer to the set to play around with the aerial. He loved that aerial even more than Mum, so in the end we married him to it. My brother and I put a scrap of net curtain around the metal prongs and pronounced them man and wife.

"Here comes the bride, all dressed in white," I sang as I walked the aerial along the top of the set while Sam declared himself the vicar, even though we were Jewish, and said, "Do you take this aerial to be your lawful wedded wife?"

"Shirl, tell 'em," Bert shouted to Mum in the kitchen who tore herself away from Doppy Linda and appeared at the doorway out of a haze of smoke, hands on her bulging hips, formidable in her crimplene smock dress.

"I'm telling you," she said, before disappearing back into the smoky gloom.

Bert sighed and pushed away the rest of his sausage and mash supper. He got out his asthma pump. Nothing about him shined anymore apart from a perfectly round bald patch on the top of his head. He looked tired from going up the road. Up the road wasn't just to the top of the street, as we knew it, but miles and miles along the straight, wide motorways in a thundering juggernaut lorry. His father had done the same work and his father before him, and they were all called Bert. Big Bert, Middle Bert, and Little Bert. Bored with the wedding ceremony, I ambled across the living room and stood at the kitchen door. The ping-pong of chatter bounced between the two women. Doppy Linda was comfortably seated at the Formica-topped table, as the captive audience. Mum discreetly slipped an LP on the record player. A blast of opera, really loud opera, flew into the living room and made Bert grimace. It never bothered Mum that she was the only living soul on the council estate to like such music.

"Listen, you'll like it," she said as she waved her hands around the smoky kitchen to "The Love Duet" from *Madame Butterfly*, conducting an imaginary orchestra, her voice straining to reach the high notes.

Doppy Linda, who seemed to be enjoying herself until then, turned her nose up and looked at the clock and said, "Oh, is that the time already?"

Then she got up to leave in the midst of the first aria when the pitch was sufficiently piercing to shatter a glass if we'd had one, but as it was, they'd all been broken and we kept to Tupperware beakers, stained Tupperware beakers that smelled of spaghetti bolognese.

The music stopped. The two women emerged from the kitchen, their Friday evening gossip over.

"I'd better get the ole man's dinner on," Linda laughed, looking at her watch. "He'll have my guts for garters."

Bert nodded as if to suggest she had overstayed her welcome and then he followed her to the door with his eyes, looking her up and down. Linda slammed the front door hard and we heard her stilettos click-clacking along the corridor.

"That woman doesn't know her own strength," Bert said.

"I think I'll go for a little walk," Mum said, bending at the knees, warming up. We all knew what her little walks entailed. Aside from opera, Mum's other passion in life was rummaging; be it for furniture, clothes, ornaments or oddments. The estate bins were the perfect place to salvage such items and Mum frequented the site just enough to keep our house full of clutter.

"You don't need anything else," Bert said without opening his eyes.

Mum didn't answer him, she just looked at me, lifting her brows and widening her eyes. It was a request for me to accompany her. I felt obliged, even though rummaging was an embarrassing business for a girl on the cusp of puberty. My biggest fear was seeing Nick Woodward, or Woody as we called him. I was more smitten with him than ever those days and I knew that he frequented the rubbish bins. He bragged about setting fire to the cars in the area and using spray paint to write "Fuk off you Kunts" on the Caretaker's garage door. Mum said if he was going to do such things he should learn to spell properly.

"Woody gets the most detentions in the whole class," I boasted as we waited for the lift to arrive.

"Bloody lift," Mum said, giving it an impatient kick. Then she returned to bouncing the pram in anticipation of our little walk. The pram was acquired at a jumble sale. The cumbersome thing stood by the front door, making it quite an effort to get in or out of the flat. Mum used it for shopping, jumble sales, and rummaging.

"I've written his initials on all my school books," I said, as the lift arrived and a whiff of stale urine seeped out. Mum entered backwards, stepping over the puddle, pulling the pram in after her, and wedging the handle up against her bosom. I squeezed in on tiptoes, attempting to evade contamination. Taking a deep breath and holding my nose, I pressed the button for the car park.

"I think he likes me," I said, after jumping out of the lift and adding to the array of wet footprints on the slippery red linoleum. "At registration, he turned his eyelids inside out and stared at me."

"Umm," Mum said, trying to maneuver the pram back out of the lift.

"He chased me with a chicken foot that he got from the butcher. He could make its claws move by pulling on a tendon."

"Umm," Mum said again, and I could tell her heart wasn't really in it.

"Annie asked him out for me last Friday in P.E. He said I was too fat. If I do a hundred sit ups a day and don't eat any more of the mint creams...."

Mum had a far away look on her face. I held tight onto the side of the pram as we jostled down the concrete ramp and along the walkway. The bins loomed so close I could smell them. Mum was smiling; she hadn't been rummaging for a few days.

"If he's at the bins, can we pretend to be chucking the pram away?" I asked. After a pause, she answered me; perhaps it was due to the fact that my question had the word "bins" in it.

"Don't be such a snob," she said. "And will you stop blimMING well going on about that boy? He's from a no-good family and you're too young to be fancying boys."

"But, Mum, I'm twelve and three quarters now. Dawn Johnson is only eleven and a half and she's got a boyfriend already."

"Well, Dawn Johnson isn't my daughter," Mum said. "And while we're at it, you're not fat, you're fine. Don't keep on about being fat. How many times do I have to tell you it's what's inside that counts?"

We made our way through the sprawling underground car park, weaving between dumped and burnt out cars. I winced at the sound of our intrusion—the squeaking pram, Mum's labored breathing and

the crystal beads of shattered windscreens grinding beneath the pram wheels and our steps.

Mum let me wait just beyond the huge metal bins. I stood far enough away to disassociate myself from the task but close enough to watch her outline come to life then fade under the car park's blinking fluorescent light. She worked deftly at her craft, leaning so far into the huge metal bin that I thought she might topple head first into the vast container. Luckily, the broad blackened soles of her feet in her fat Dr. Scholl's kept her grounded. Each time she rose from the endeavour, she inspected her find, measuring it with keen, squinting eyes.

Mum lingered over the highlight of the loot, a posh frilly dress fit for a bridesmaid or a Catholic girl at her confirmation. It must have been earmarked for me as it was much too small for Mum, and besides, she held it aloft as opposed to up against her bloated belly. There was an array of boys' and men's trousers. Mum hauled them out and selected those she would keep with no less deliberation than choosing pick 'n' mix from Woolworth's. She stacked furniture and bric-a-brac in a pile beside her and draped clothing over one arm until it became too cumbersome, whereby it was placed atop the bric-a-brac, forming a bundle that soon became a pile and finally a mountain.

When Mum stretched her arms into the air and brushed the dirt off her hands, I knew we were close.

"Tamar, come and help me," she said, much too loud for my liking.

I darted out of the shadows and we piled up the goods onto the lumbering pram—an assortment of clothes, shoes, a sea green ashtray coated with soot, and a coffee table with a missing leg. Covering the load with a crocheted blanket, we began steering it back toward home.

"It just needs the leg glued back on," Mum said, revealing a stubby table leg sticking out from her pocket. Then gathering speed in her desire to return home and sort everything out, she misjudged a corner and ran over my toes.

"OUCH," I squealed, as the pram almost careened into the wall of the car park. And that's when I saw him approach—his unmistakable wiry frame, oil-stained jeans, and determined strut.

"Woody," I said, in a voice so low it was pitiful.

"Jumble Princess," he remarked, his face lighting up as if he was genuinely pleased to see me, as if my fears were totally unfounded.

I stopped dead in my tracks, and I felt Mum stop too, both of us dwarfed by the mound of rubbish in the pram. Mum reached out a grimy hand, redistributing the load, making a steadfast claim to her prized possessions.

"Good evening, Jumble Queen," Woody said to Mum, bowing like a thespian and clasping a family size box of Bryant & May matches close to his chest.

"Don't you 'jumble queen' me, my boy," Mum responded. "Facetious little blighter."

"Facetious? What, you gone and swallowed the dictionary?" Woody asked. He shook his box of matches like a skilled percussionist and was gone, eyes scanning the concrete horizon.

I loved Woody's eyes. They were intense, narrow, and so close to his nose that they set him apart from other boys. Bert said those eyes made him look shifty.

I tried to follow Woody through the shadows, to have one last look at his nimble body and long legs as he gained ground on us.

Mum sped up again, regaining control of the vehicle and planning the evening ahead.

"There's some nice bits in there for you, Tam; I think you'll like them." I knew I was in for a night of trying things on, things that other people didn't want. Cast-offs.

Bert was asleep by the time we arrived home, the aerial on his lap and the television flickering in bursts of static.

"Oh, that was just what I was after," Mum rejoiced, pulling item after item from the pram. "It only needs a good wash and a stitch. Look, I can put a zip in here and a button there, take it in here and out there." I stood close by, ready and waiting for instruction.

"Turn around," Mum demanded as she threw the frilly dress with puff sleeves over my head. "Now stand still," she said, pulling and prodding at me with her hard, stubby fingers. "Breathe in, breathe out, arms up, arms down."

I looked down at myself in the garment, at the way the fabric ruched in under my breasts and flared out from my waist. I lifted my arms, felt

the dress rise above my knees, and that's when I saw the stains, faint yellow circles of perspiration.

"That's nothing that a bit of Shout won't fix," Mum said.

I clamped my arms back down to my sides, the evidence concealed.

"That's the find of the night," Mum said. "Almost regal."

"Like a jumble princess," I added, wishing Woody could get a glimpse of me in such finery.

"Umm," Mum said.

Finally, having exhausted us both, she reached for her sewing kit and sunk deep into the couch, gloating over her finds and the good fortune that a little walk could bring.

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