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BAG LADY

It was eight in the morning when he first saw her. Not that you would call someone like that a 'her' ... nobody would. It made a mockery.

The bus was crowded: people coughing, edging from each other's newspapers, resting sandwich boxes on knees, not talking much. Always the same, this vast, slow unwilling movement onwards towards the day.

The boy across the aisle, who could not have been more than sixteen, shuffled his boots and slapped the back of his hand down on the newspaper so that the image of a naked girl crackled and her breasts folded in.

'Nice pair.'

'Uh.'

The other boy, whose hands, calloused and whitened with plaster, rested loosely on his knees, glanced down briefly, then returned his gaze to the window. His companion was staring avidly at the picture.

'Could do some damage there, mate,' he said, with a short laugh.

'Looks a right slag', said his friend.

Nobby Price barely noticed these things. He was stretching for the strap as the bus lurched around a corner. His corner. The little line of shops - the Star Cafe, the small supermarket with a grille on its window, the Indian takeaway promising 'Real fish and chips', the Rave Cave boutique with the word 'Seperetes' on its faded awning and the small sweetshop and tobacconist - leading up to the ornately etched glass windows of the Prince Albert on the corner itself. And in the middle, between the takeaway and the Rave Cave, his own shop, there for ten years now. A grille over his small window too, but it appeared to protect nothing more than a dusty brown blind.

Nobby frowned as the bus juddered to a halt just a hundred yards down Elton Road. Someone waiting outside his shop - but that was not it. The lettering. There was no doubt that he would have to have it re-done. ADULT

MAGAZINES. The sign was indistinct.

Nobby took pride in his shop. Now he understood more about things, he was glad he took after his grandmother. 'You have to keep up appearances, Malcolm,' Nan used to say, as she scoured the doorstep, her massive rear vibrating with the force of the attack on its spotless surface. Doilies on plates, and slippers by the door - and still she would breathe, 'Just look at the state of this place,' bending with difficulty to pick an imaginary speck of dust from the threadbare rug, then poking the fire with such vigour the back boiler roared. Always, when she went to the shops, she wore a hat and gloves, her coat buttoned firmly even in warm weather.

'Neat and clean, Malcolm, that's my motto. '

The figure outside his shop was far from neat and clean. A bundle of rags, grey-brown like the street lurked half in his doorway, half out, with a large bulging plastic bag beside it. It. Not a person, a thing. Nobby felt a second's uneasiness, as if the grimy walls of the street shrank.

'Oi, you ...!' he shouted, 'Git out of it!'

The effect was immediate. The bundle of rags gathered itself together, somehow absorbed the plastic bags into its mass, and lurched away up the street with surprising speed. Briefly, it glanced over its shoulder and Nobby glimpsed a face grey with dirt, and a mouth gaping black like

a cave, as if laughing silently. Long grey hair hung down its back in greasy strands. 'Bleeding bag ladies,' he mumbled, searching for his keys.

Inside the shop he switched on the fluorescent light, its bright blueness making him blink after the soft monochrome of the street. He looked around with satisfaction. Once this had been a small grocer's. He had retained the old polished counter, and kept it mirror-like with spray polish. 'I love to see things all clean and shiny,' Nan used to say, as she ground the duster into a tin of lavender wax and attacked the furniture. And little Malcolm, plump even then, and dressed in old-fashioned clothes which drew mockery at school, would walk round after her, watching and asking, 'But why, Nan?'

'Why what, love?'

'Why did me mam leave me? Didn't she want a baby?'

The lips would press tightly together, and the duster would perform its circles with vigour.

'Malcolm Price! No good ever came...'

She never said anything, not ever, and Nobby would sneak into her bedroom and take the single photograph from the bottom drawer, and stare at the pretty woman with the smile so wide you might drown in it, and whose hair curled in a roll right round her head. Once he said, 'Mum?', but the sound croaked uneasily in the silent room, like a bad word.

Now he ran a hand over the counter, and stood, looking at the small shop. Twice a week he mopped the black-and-white tiled floor, panting with the effort and paying special attention to the corners. Behind him, the wooden drawers where the grocer had kept dry goods, was the unusual material, brought out for certain regulars with particular tastes. And all round the shop, in neat wooden racks was the usual stuff, most of it shrink-wrapped, but some of it, the harmless magazines, dog-eared beneath his stencilled notice advising clients of the shop's cut-price swap service. Nobby had bought a child's alphabet stencil, and done the notice carefully in red biro, covering his work with transparent stick-on plastic.

He put the kettle on, in the tiny galley behind the shop, next to the store room and waited.

Once a journalist had come from London to write an article, one of those women who sparkle at people, dazzling them. Something in her face had reminded him faintly, disturbingly, of that photograph in the drawer. He had let her spend the day in the shop, even though at least six clients took one look and retreated, seeing a woman at the counter. 'You're driving them away, Sara ,' he joked, making tea.

'What made you start?' she asked.

'Start what?'

She waved a hand around. 'This. Selling this... er... stuff.'

'You think it's terrible don't you, love? Well, shall I tell you something? This is a service I'm giving here. If it wasn't for me, these blokes, they'd have nothing.'

'Well, they've got nothing now - really,' she said, smiling at him, so widely he had to turn away, and busy himself tidying the racks.

'Yes, they have,' he said, 'they've got me.'

'But how...I mean, why this?'

Nobby shrugged. 'I dunno...I spent most of my life ducking and diving, a bit of this and a bit of that, and I ended up here. I always wanted to own my own shop...and that's about it.'

'But *this*...'

'Just something people need to buy. Like sliced bread,' he laughed.

That day one or two young men came in, looking for the stuff showing breasts so big they seemed deformed, but that was it. Too quiet. By afternoon he could see the journalist was bored. So he made up a few stories of police raids, closed up the shop and took her on a walk through the neighbourhood. She brightened as a couple of the girls chatted to him on a corner ('Wanna free go, Nobby?' - laughing loudly), and Tony, who owned the massage parlour told his usual jokes, and the CID man, Andy, in his leather

and jeans, promised Nobby that he'd turn a blind eye if he slipped a couple of mags in the window.

'Gotta watch the law though,' he said, without smiling. 'We're bound to get some old bag complaining.' Then he grinned at Sara, fancying her. She flirted back, and Nobby felt jealous.

It all went into her notebook, and then she had gone, flashing her smile in farewell., Nobby waited eagerly for the posh magazine to come out. He didn't read much, so it took him a long time to finish the columns of print. When he had finished, he walked into the back and looked into the old spotted mirror that hung in the toilet. He knew what he would see - but you stop looking at your own face, as you get older. Nan used to stand him by the mirror, and spatter him with water as she dragged a wet comb through his hair. His face was pink then, scrubbed with a coarse flannel. Now...he saw it fleshy, almost fat, with the straight fringe he had cut across his forehead, combing the hair straight from the back to cover the thinning patch.

'A small stout middle-aged man, almost revelling in his own ugliness,' she wrote, 'whose days are spent in that mind-numbing monotony which shrivels the spirit, like his wares.'

But he *liked* his days. Besides, he thought, contemplating the glass, his face was not that bad. He had seen worse. Old Mr Evans, who kept a blow-up dolly in his

bedsit, came in every Wednesday at nine in the morning, on his way home from his night watchman's job, to buy a new magazine. He never returned them, and sometimes Nobby imagined the stacks growing taller and taller, until Mr Evans ate off them, and sat on them, and slept on them. Paper furniture in full colour. But his face ... There had been a fire once, and so half his skull was prawn-pink and taut, the features stretched tight, like a mask, while the other side of his face hung in wrinkly jowels. Nobby joked to another customer, one day, when old Evans had shuffled out with his new purchase inside his overcoat, that no wonder he was a good night watchman, because he'd terrify any intruder.

'He is oblivious to the future. When I suggested that men would soon be looking at porn on their computers, he laughed. 'Never!' he said, 'and anyway, I don't call it that, I call it Erotica, love.' The truth is men like Nobby are dinosaurs, and as surely doomed to extinction. At the end of his working day he goes home to his small bedsit, where he keeps a photograph of his grandmother on the mantelpiece, and tattered pornographic stock under his bed, and listens to the clock ticking, wondering why he is alone.'

She made it sound so sad, so hopeless - the life of a small plump no-hoper trading in dirty books, instead of a perfectly happy shopkeeper giving a service, quite happy to put his feet up at night and watch the TV. He could not

recall how she knew about his Nan's picture, but what was wrong with having it on the mantelpiece? Thank goodness he had not forgotten himself (that smiling face, dazzling, inviting confidences) enough to tell her that tucked behind it was the other picture, of the pretty woman with the hair-halo. She would have made that sound even sadder.

After about twenty minutes the first customer came in, quickly followed by two more. He had seen them all before, and nodded greeting. They all began browsing in the unwrapped stock, and then moved to flick through the shrink wrapped covers, sometimes stopping to stare at a particular cover, all pink flesh and strategically placed stickers. 'Nice day now,' said one man to Nobby, as he passed cash across the counter.

Nobby followed him to the door to look out. The rain had stopped; a watery sun lit the city street, streaking puddles with silvery blue. As the customers murmured goodbye and turned to walk away, Nobby noticed her again. The bag lady was standing motionless across the road staring at the shop. There was something deliberate, almost expectant about her stillness - as someone will freeze waiting for the shutter to click.

Nobby opened his mouth to shout, then closed it again. He had no right; she was not standing on his doorstep; it was a matter for the police if she was causing an

obstruction - not for him. Yet that did not calm his sudden rage. He did not want her there, that was all. 'Bad for business,' he muttered to himself.

He slammed the door, making its metal grille rattle. Seeing they were alone the man left in the shop sidled up to Nobby, whispering, 'I'm looking for y'know, something, a bit ... a bit more ...'

'You want the hard stuff, mate. Any particular bag?'

The man's eyes flickered. He was about fifty, quite well dressed, and had been in the shop once before. Usually Nobby could remember when customers asked for something special, but this one defeated him. Sometimes he would try to guess: something about the mouth of some men showed their secret desire to see girls tied tightly, heads pulled back by their hair, limbs twisted into submission - see them punished. Nobby sometimes entertained himself by placing mental bets, as he watched customers finger through his wares.

'What about this one? Little boys perhaps ...'

The man looked around again, and whispered hoarsely, even there was no one to hear, 'I'm an ... er ... animal lover, if you see what I mean?' Nobby turned to the drawer. 'Here,' he said, dumping a small pile of magazines on the counter. 'Some good stuff in there. Not cheap mind, and I'm not unwrapping any of it.'

It pleased him that they went away with what they wanted. Personally, he once said to Andy, over a pint, he wouldn't give tuppence for any of it, not even the normal stuff. 'I don't know why they do it, these birds, that's for sure.' Andy laughed and emptied his glass. 'You're not normal, Nobby, that's your trouble. The only man I know who works in a sweet shop and spits out chocolate! Turns me on all right ... Anyway, you know as well as I do why they do it. They do it 'cos they want the money and they're tarts. Simple as that, innit? Now if you'll excuse me, I got to go and meet this bloke - my new grass, and he's a right bastard ... '

At 12.30 prompt as usual, Nobby locked up and went to the Star Cafe for dinner. Sitting down with his plate of sausage, egg and chips, he saw her again, her back to the room. Again the wave of irritation washed over him, and he waved to Avril. She stood by his table, wiping her hands on her apron.

'What's up, Nobby, sausages not done right for you?'

'Why'd you let that dirty old woman in here?' he asked abruptly.

Avril glanced across to where the bag lady sat, or rather squatted, at the red formica table, her back hunched.

'Her? Oh, she's not doing any harm. As long as she can pay for her cuppa ... '

'Seen her before, have you?'

She shook her head and shrugged. 'They pass through, sometimes, these crazy old girls.'

'She's been hanging around my shop,' he hissed.

Avril laughed. 'Maybe she wants to be a model in a dirty magazine, Nobs.'

'Well, I want her out of here while I'm eating me meal,' he said, with such vehemence the girl looked astonished. 'I come here every day, Avril, and I don't want the place ... con ... contaminated by whatever germs she's carrying.'

A few minutes later he heard a short laugh, more a cackle, which stopped as abruptly as it began, almost as if a throat had been squeezed. Then a movement, a rising of rags and tatters; and in a sudden dread he averted his eyes, and stared fixedly at the tomato ketchup bottle, as the old woman shambled out of the door, leaving a sour smell in the air behind her.

When Nobby came out of the cafe and turned towards his shop, she was there, squatting in the gutter outside, looking up at his sign. Then - he stopped and stared in disbelief. She hitched up her rags, and he caught a glimpse of skinny shanks, and the pinkish-grey flesh of slack buttocks, as the stream of urine spattered into the rainwater that ran down towards the drain.

'Oh Jesus,' he said aloud, feeling vomit rising in his throat, as the street bucked and curved around him.

(You're a dirty, dirty little boy,' his Nan screamed, thrashing him with her belt, as he cried and wriggled, and his wet trousers chaffed his thighs. He could smell his own pee still, soaked into cotton knit and grey flannel, which were picked up with finger and thumb as she sobbed with weariness and rage, 'It's me who has to wash and iron, and no thanks for it, no thanks from you, and not a word from her all these years. Dirty little cow, and you take after her, you hear me? You take after her!')

A passing van driver catcalled the bag lady from his window. Nobby rested his hand on the wall for a second and closed his eyes, waiting for the dizziness to pass, as the distant roar of the traffic roared strangely. When he looked again, she was crossing the road. A car swerved and the driver yelled abuse from his window. The old woman lurched on, dragging her bulging bag, stationed herself on the corner pavement opposite his shop, and sat down. Was she waiting for someone? But who? No - Nobby knew that she was there for one purpose - to torment him.

His hand shook as he dialled the number. All the boys at the station knew him. It was easy. He made a joke and heard laughter down the line. All he to do now was wait. He slowly around the shop, tidying the rows of magazines so that they overlapped at precise intervals, showing half of each wrapped cover: the overall impression was of serried

pink flesh bisected - one jutting buttock, one breast, all topped by half a head, half a smile...

On impulse he plucked one of the magazines from the stand, and slipped his nail around the wrapping, letting it drift to the floor. It was years, probably, since he had actually looked at much of his stock. Run - of - the mill bondage this one was, with most of the women posing, usually with a group of men, shaved, and dressed to look like little girls. Nobby flicked the pages dispassionately. Funny what people liked, he thought, uneasy as he contemplated faces mimicking tears, fear, pain, grief .. Or was it real? You couldn't tell.

It was like your own life, he thought. You looked back at things, trying to remember how it felt, reading in a posh magazine a pretty woman's account of your own ugliness and trying to recapture that momentary lurch in the stomach, the rush of tears of self-pity, rage and betrayal. But nothing came. Nothing. It had all gone, somehow.

Even that other time was distant, viewed down the wrong end of a telescope, so that he was indeed very, very small, but so were the others, the three of them, older boys at school, who finally told him the truth.

'You know what your mother is Pricey? She's an 'or - that's what.'

'Bin on the game for years, me brother says,' crowed the

other.

'What's it like to be a slag's lad, then? Slag's lad, slag, slag, SLAG!'

You couldn't fight if you were small; there was no point. Pointless too the direct question a few days later, 'I want to know about me Mam, Nan. Where is she now?'

'She's dead, Malcolm, and that's all you need to know. And I want you to make a promise. I want you to promise me never to ask me any more questions, not ever.'

It was easy to keep that promise to the old lady, Nobby thought, for even when he heard the soil rattle down on wood, a few years later, and looked down on her cheap coffin, returning to the little clean rented house for the last time to pack his things - even then, he did not really want to know at all. There was no point.

He heard the police car pull up, and went to the door. She - *it* - was standing outside the shop now, face about a foot from the door, looking in. The sudden nearness made him recoil. As he stared, her withered lips curved back in an enormous parody of a smile, black and wide and empty, reminding him of something he could not identify. He shivered, and felt tears prick behind his eyes. 'Take her away, oh please God, take it away,' he whispered. Then the uniformed constable was at her shoulder, laying a hand gingerly on her filthy ragged coat.

'Come on, me old dearie,' he said in a loud voice, 'let's be going ...' And with one last backward glance at Nobby, her shoulders shaking in that crazy, silent laughter, she was led to the car.

Nobby bent and picked up the filmy plastic wrapper that lay on the floor, rolling it up and depositing it in the waste bin he emptied every day. Then he took out the spray polish and intensified the mirror finish on his counter, until at last, through the mechanical motion, his hands stopped shaking. All afternoon he stood there, as the trickle of customers came and went, talking even less than usual, staring fixedly at the patch of light behind the grille, the space where her face had been. Now it was there no longer, he needed somehow to picture it, as if summoning up that hideously familiar image would give the answer to something he needed to know. But there was nothing beyond the grille, nothing out there except the scrap of grey sky above the buildings, the perpetual presence of the street. Still he stared in a daze, fancying suddenly that were he to walk across his tiled floor to that door, it would not open, never open again - leaving him locked in with all his stock, behind that grille forever.

He closed up early. Walked along to the cafe, feeling hungry, as if he'd been emptied out. Avril leaned on the counter, smoking another cigarette in her chain, and talking

to a young woman Nobby had never seen before. He didn't like the look of her, pert and over made up, with a too-short skirt.

'Nobby, this is me cousin June. She's come here to work.'

'Doing what?' he asked.

The girl giggled, and drew deeply on her cigarette.

'Dancing,' she said, 'Go-go type of thing. Chenies Club.'

'Bit of a dump, isn't it?' he said, and the girl looked downcast, then shrugged. 'It's a job,' she said. 'You take what you can get.'

'Do you just?' he said archly. But the girl heard the coldness in his voice, and bridled.

'Yeah,' she said, 'don't you?'

'Nobby's real local,' Avril explained trying to make something right that wasn't, without knowing why. 'He owns the sex shop just along the road.'

June raised her eyebrows suggestively, 'Oooh, really!'

'It's not a sex shop, love,' said Nobby patiently, flattered that Avril's cousin was looking at him at last as though ... well, as if he was a man to reckon with. 'ADULT MAGAZINES - that's what it says on the sign, and that's all it is.'

And at the annoying memory of that sign he frowned for a moment. The letters were so faded now, the T, the M and the S barely legible, so that in some lights it might be taken for an Asian name, or something equally daft. 'A *shabby*

little shop in a grimy street' - that was what the woman from London had written. It wouldn't do at all, Nobby thought.

No - now he would spend money on a proper new sign, a big one in red perspex with the lettering in yellow, bright and clean. You've got to keep up appearances.



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