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SHORT STORIES

Jean's Genes

Thinking in tangents was common to Ron. Approaching thirty, fast, he was good looking with fashionable length dark hair, suitably tousled for one who worked as a research biochemist. Normally thought of as serious and dedicated to his work – he adopted a perpetual frown while at the factory – his fellow researchers would have been unable to understand his peculiar state tonight. Ron stood, still and vacant, in the West-end of Glasgow clutching a hot Chinese carry-out meal and a bottle of Mateus Rosé.

He was en route to an evening meal with his girlfriend Jean. Perhaps fiancée would be a more appropriate label for her as it was generally assumed they would wed. Sometime.

Jean had phoned him a short time ago and said, “You’ll need to bring in the meal tonight.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t buy enough chicken for the two of us.”

“But you knew I was coming round, Jean,” Ron said, irritated, “Why did you buy only a single portion?”

“Sweet and sour chicken for me, sweetheart. I had no more money, stupid.” Stupid pronounced stoo-pit, an attempt at endearment in Lowland Scots.

Ron sighed in resignation. It was useless to protest, this was just Jean. She was tall, supple and beautiful: a model-between-engagements looking for a suitable way to earn a living – like marriage to a biochemist with a flourishing career in a food plant.

“Sweet and sour chicken,” he said. “Anything else?”

“A bottle of wine might come in handy. And hurry up, luv. I’ve missed you today.”

“I’ve missed you too,” he said mechanically, but he had worried most of the day. He was behind with his research and time was running out. His protein synthesis refused to be transcribed from the perfect paper formula to the two-litre laboratory flask, let alone to the fifty-gallon production vessel. To convert oil into food was essential, Ron was convinced, to man’s survival as a species, and feasible – at least on paper. Also, Jean’s debts were a mounting concern. His overdraft was rising at a rate of knots as his salary strained to support two separate flats, as well as Jean’s insistence that Ron needed proper presents, as she called them, at birthdays and Christmas. It was futile to point out that he paid for them and would rather do without. He suffered alone – and paid her bills. Jean never worried about money, a trait he both envied and abhorred. He wished sometimes he could emulate her constant cheerfulness and disdain for money – a bind, she would say, that restricts freedom and prevents pleasure. And yet, monthly, his debt to Mammon would thud through the letter-box, courtesy of the Bank of Scotland. Then he would groan and steel himself for a solemn discussion on the folly of frivolity – but it never came. Jean refused to be pinned down and would blithely tell him to discard his fetters, stop worrying and make love. So, he did.

Although neither mentioned it, both were aware of a solution. The upkeep of only one flat was a

nagging sore to Ron, in whose mind existed a dichotomy on the wisdom of taking vows. He shied away from the plunge of marriage like someone teetering on the brink of a first parachute jump. Most survived it... but some did not.

The Italian Warehouse had many rows of wines all with small white labels showing the price. Systematic and yet somehow lacking in grace. Smells assailed Ron: pickled onions, nuts, spices. He glanced over the wines looking for the unmistakable Mateus Rosé. Behind Ron a slovenly twelve-year-old was mentally devouring the loaded trays of crisps, stopping only when one crisp away from vomiting. He rubbed a snot on the sleeve of his jumper as the owner, a swarthy obesity in a greasy-white overall, stood on tiptoes to yell over Ron's shoulder in an I-ti-Glaswegian accent,

"Haw, you! Urchina! Get outa ma shope!"

"Keep yer hair oan, Ant'ny. Ah'm only lukin'."

The urchin stood his plimsolled ground with quiet dignity as Ant'ny tried to decide between a tirade of abuse at his cropped head or a shrug of resignation at the younger generation's manners. Ron watched his sweating features with interest. In his indecision Ant'ny attempted a confident smile which flickered briefly and the nettled into a grimace of obsequious helplessness.

Ron tossed a packet of crisps at the boy who caught it effortlessly almost as if he had been expecting it.

"Ta, mister," he said, without surprise or even gratitude. He crunched the crisp packet into his pocket as he shuffled out.

Ron paid for the Mateus Rosé and the crisps, and left to catch his bus.

He felt at one with the city tonight, with a carefree, almost benevolent, kindness. This was unusual, but not rare, and may have been connected with his gift to the urchin. It was not much to Ron but... he like to think it significant for the urchin although, remembering the boy's incongruous pride, he could not be sure. If Ron had tried he might just have recalled himself as an urchin. But he did not try.

The bus queue was short. Not many people from here used buses, only the young, the infirm and Ron, who enjoyed watching them. At the head stood a young couple, poorly dressed, with a bundle of pink struggling in the girl's arms. They were together and yet apart, somehow distant. Married and visiting – Ron looked them over slowly before deciding – most likely her parents. She was squat but not without a certain poise. Her clothes were old but gave the impression of having once been fine, perhaps in the pre-pink bundle days. Her husband was tall, thin almost to the point of emaciation and had a shirt buttoned to the neck without a tie. His slouch and long unwashed hair gave him a forlorn appearance not common amongst local youths. Ron could visualise a casual meeting at a dance hall, a three minute sweat at some seedy party, disgrace, marriage and the pink bundle. Or, perhaps, pink bundle then marriage.

Behind them a girl of about eighteen or so was obviously late and impatient for the bus to arrive. She was magnificent in a thigh-tight velvet trouser suit and an open-necked blouse, or more accurately an open-breasted blouse. Clearly visible below her short grey-streaked hair hung a pair of golden razor blades, complete with hallmark, masquerading as ear-rings. Ron felt tempted to lean over and whisper some advice – keep him waiting! It's not worth it! look at the couple in front! take your time! A shaft of early-evening sunlight caught the razor blades and reminded Ron of a battle scene with light reflected from the as yet unbloodied swords. This sufficed as an excuse to hold his peace.

A fat woman in a below-the-knee mackintosh and headscarf with scenes of Canada stood between Ron and the razor blades. Her shopping bag hung in the crook of an arm, nestling in the small alcove between her swollen mammaries and bloated belly, while her other hand mechanically lifted a cigarette – a fag, she would call it – to her puffy red lips. Ron wondered whose stair-head she had just scrubbed.

The bus took Ron to the city centre and he walked through Queen Street Station to catch the West-bound bus to Jean's flat. Unconsciously his pace quickened as he became infected by the bustle of the busy station and he soon arrived at the bus stop, surprised at the speed of his walk.

It was past eight o'clock, Saturday night, and still some stragglers from a football match milled around. Two such specimens were slouched at the bus stop, wearing green scarves. Ron automatically checked himself for any conspicuously blue clothes which might act as a taunt and was relieved to find none. This was an almost inborn habit although neither of these characters looked capable of causing trouble. They seemed well past that stage. One sat with his feet astride a pool of bilious green vomit, probably not the first, in the gutter. With his head supported by his hands and elbows on knees, he was at the stage here he sought comfort and sympathy. He spoke in a slur to his companion who regarded him through alcohol-dilated pupils as he lay securely across the battered, and empty, waste basket.

Thoughtful of the Council to put arm-rests on bus stops, considered Ron, as he tried to assume disinterest without showing disgust. He listened carefully.

"Tell me 'bout it," said the one in the waste basket.

"Naw," mumbled the other, "A canny." And he drifted into a doze.

His friend dealt him a hefty kick on the base of his spine sending him into the gutter where his fall was broken by the vomit. Ron winced. Tomorrow the gutter-one will wonder what caused the bruise.

It had the desired effect of concentrating his attention though.

"It's ma wife," came the plaintive voice from the gutter. "Don't say Ah telt ye. But she's been unfaithful tae me. Many times."

Odd, thought Ron had he been sober and telling this tale, unfaithful would hardly have been his word of choice.

"Oh aye," said his friend, obviously not surprised.

"Ye kent, didn't ye."

"Aye. Everybody kens 'bout her."

"Oh, Jesus Christ! How come?"

Ron saw his bus at the stop just up the road. Should he catch it, or wait to hear the end? Would there be an end?

"Huv you? Ah mean did she? oh fuck!" mumbled the gutter-one.

His friend sneered. "Whit's up?" he said in an arrogant challenging manner.

The bus was now rapidly approaching. Ron watched as the gutter-one rose, staggered onto the road and then lurched to clutch at the bus stop just as the bus, hideous green and yellow, hissed to a halt.

"Bastard!" groaned the one with the bilious-green stain on his backside. Whether at his friend, his wife or the bus driver was uncertain. Probably an economic curse at life in general.

Ron hopped on the bus and paid his fare to the brown face and white teeth – who else would work on a Saturday night? – and took his seat.

He glanced back once as the bus shuddered on. The friends faced each other across the divide and support of the bus stop. From a distance they looked more pathetic than dangerous.

Seated, Ron regained his calm state of mind. Friendship in a city is a strange thing; a few short hours ago, in a large crowd and singing in unison, those two at the bus stop would have felt surrounded by comrades, united in a common cause – hatred of the blue enemy. Ron visualised the throng milling from the ground as one huge animated life-form, dwindling into smaller units, then into pairs. Finally it all seemed futile, empty, lonely as the vocal animal split into single frightened humans, each returning to the drudgery of normality.

Humans procreated during what is loosely termed the act of love and Ron shivered as he considered the sex-act, probably drunken, which threw up his bus stop companions. Could it be called love to bring up children in this hateful city? Perhaps a share of the misery was the best that could be hoped for.

Thoughts can grow fertile on a bus because of the motion and the anonymous company as the bus rattles and hisses, picks up some and spits out others, and Ron's mind had already been strangely stimulated. His thoughts followed a train of reflections from drunken sex, heredity, genetic and environmental effects to his own children.

He tried to imagine his son and the upbringing he would have and came to dwell on Jean as a mother. He sighed, as the smooth linkage of thought broke down at this point.

Ron stepped off the bus at the Chinese Carry-out. He could just glimpse the corner of Jean's flat window as he strode into the smell of boiled rice, curry powder and sea-food.

Three youths, a formidable number, with long hair and blue scarves stood at the counter consuming their order.

Ron ordered two sweet and sour chickens, fried rice, from the diminutive yellow person behind the counter. He felt the eyes of one of the youths regard him as he turned to analyse the jangling light showing views of the Yangtse River – did they still call it that? – that he had seen many times before.

“Ur you a Tim?”

Ron mentally checked and his heart bounced into the back of his throat as he remembered his green tie. He shook his head, fearing to speak. A well-built, spruce man, about five years younger than himself, now stood behind Ron and he sniffed loudly and said,

“Scum,” in a well-heeled West-end accent.

Ron hoped he was referring to the counter, and said querulously,

“Pardon?”

“Just ignore them,” the West-ender continued with a disdainful glance at the astonished blue-scarves. “They're only looking for trouble.”

My God! Thought Ron, and now they've found it!

“Who're you talkin' 'bout, smart arse,” said one of the blue-scarves.

The West-ender pointedly ignored them and said to the counter-assistant, wide-eyed and worried. “Three beef curries, one with fried rice, and two chicken foo yungs, please.”

Looking around, Ron noticed a group of four young men, short-hair-and-old-school-tie types, outside the Carry-out. They were watching inside with interest.

The West-ender turned to the blue-scarves and said. “I beg your pardon?” Ron hastily paid for the grateful delivery of his order and scuttled to the door. He had to wait as the group-of-four filed in. Then he left and stood a moment looking in. Two of the blue-scarves were gleefully facing the complacent West-ender while the third said something to them as he nodded at the group-of-four.

The Chinese counter-assistant was attempting to placate his customers, fearing his premises and licence were in danger.

From outside Ron saw the scene through a gap in the blinds and thought it resembled a still from a silent movie. The difference was that in movies there was a hero, but which of this group could be given the starring role? The football supporters looking for trouble, as they undoubtedly were? The sneering West-ender and his group-of-four, only too willing to provide it? Briefly Ron considered casting the Chinese youth as hero but he shook with fear, his eyes darting from one set of protagonists to the other.

Deciding that no hero existed, Ron left the cameo view to make for Jean while the meal was still hot.

The walk was short but Ron's mind was in overdrive. Genes, dominant traits, Jean's quiet assurance, his own weakness, football hooligans and conceited West-enders jostled in his brain like pieces of jigsaw poured from a freshly opened box. Disordered yet with a vague aura of composition and connections his thoughts elbowed each other in the mid-air of his mind, when suddenly ... click! He stopped walking with a jolt as the picture developed. The suave West-ender was Jean; he behaved as Jean, in fact in Ron's mind he now even looked like Jean. Twenty-or-so years from now Jean's son would look and perhaps even behave like him. Ron considered himself to be lacking in dominance compared with Jean and so expected her traits to be expressed in her son ... but, and here was the problem, he would be Ron's son too. Part of him, his progeny, and yet so little like him, surely, that he felt distant, almost a voyeur, able suddenly to see the dim future clearly. A future of conflict, strife, parental dissatisfaction and ultimate isolation. One Jean he could just about cope with, at a distance, but two! It was hopeless. And frightening.

Ron later was unable to remember how long he stood on the pavement seeing his stark future crystallised before him. Many buses and people passed by but no-one took any notice of this person, clutching his steaming Chinese meal and staring vacantly several yards in front. He swayed slightly as he worried, giving passers-by the impression that he had 'had a few' and it was one particularly wide sway which woke Ron from his reflections. He blinked and stared around wondering just what he could do to prevent the inevitable from happening.

After a minute or two, Ron began to walk slowly towards Jean. It must not go on, he could not continue to act as before.... as if nothing had happened. He could not cope.

Dejected and weary, Ron climbed the single flight of stairs and rang the bell of Jean's flat.

At first sight of her happy face, Ron recalled the resemblance to the West-ender and shivered.

She kissed him, saying, "Darling, you're cold. Why don't you buy a car, for goodness sake? Come on in, get a heat."

"Here, take this stuff," grumbled Ron, escaping from her embrace. "My God, Jean, it's so hot in here!" visions of tumbling electricity meters and huge red-edged bills. "Turn the heating off, for pity's sake!"

"Not until my flower is warm," she said, taking the parcels. "Just look at your face! It's so dirty! I'll just give it a wash before we eat. Come!"

"I don't want it washed."

"Come on silly," she said laughing.

Ron was amazed. She by-passed serious matters that he had earnestly considered, always assuming that no really disturbing event would happen. He could not afford such complacency and had to work, and pay, to prevent the disturbing events from happening.

She deftly removed his shirt in the bathroom as Ron tried to put his troubled emotions into words. 'I am unable to continue.' He was going to say. 'Do you think I was born to be taken advantage of? I

can't always be a pillar of strength, your prop and support.'

He felt angry and frustrated as she laughingly filled the sink with hot water and arranged towels and soap. But he found difficulty in retaining his bitterness, the pain and sore was beginning to ebb. The reason for his distress was slipping away from him.

"Sit here," said Jean, placing a stool beside the sink. He offered no resistance.

She began to wash his face in a delicate, feminine way. Ron felt the warm water run down his grimy features and could smell the delicious aroma of her soap as she pressed against him. As the suds were rinsed off, yellow and foaming, he forgot his rehearsed words, his ire at their son-to-be evaporated at her gentle touch.

He sighed, and spoke to her from the depths of the down-soft towel, "That's better, Jean. What wonderful ideas you have! It's so reassuring, a natural instinct."