

RICHIE OF THE YARD,

Dinner time had finally arrived and Richie made to take his seat head of centre table. His appearance had caused more than a little controversy. His skin was a little paler although his cheeks were highlighted, his eyes a little darker, lips a little fuller. Everyone had noticed but not a word was said. Howway man, this was Richie Lowers, boilermaker's shop steward, hero of many a revolution, a man's man, so what if he wanted to look a little bit different today, who was he harming?

After a few quiet, thoughtful moments Richie rose to address his workmates some of who were his closest friends. "Lads, I've got something important I need to share with you."

"Is it about the pay rise, Rich?" Jonty Taylor asked in mid chew of his egg and tomato stottie. Jonty was compulsive viewing when eating, the middle of his face, void of teeth east and west, seemed to be hinged and when he chewed his face closed in over, as the fringe on his forehead and his bushy beard became one.

"No Jonty, sorry not this time."

"Lads," Richie continued, "last night I was made aware of the path my life must follow and now I see clearly the road that leads ahead."

"Are you getting a transfer to Swans then, Rich?"

"No Jonty, this is about my personal life. For years I've been seeing half a picture, listening to half a tune, reading half a book."

"I've had books like that Rich, I just can't get into that Jeffrey Archer."

"Yes thank you for sharing that with us Jonty, as well as three

quarters of your stottie. Where was I? Yes the time has come to reach out and accept my feminine form, nay to touch upon my female side."

"I touched on Susie Wilson's female side the other night, " Jimmy informed the table of fellow apprentices in a whisper that carried.

"Aye in your dreams."

"I did."

"No you didn't."

"Boys, boys will you save this argument for the playground."

Richie finally brought the game of verbal ping-pong to a halt as he struggled vainly to get the main issue back on track. "Lads, if I could continue, I feel that there is something inside me trying to escape."

"It'll be one of Molly's bacon sandwiches," a voice boomed up from the back amid hilarious laughter. Molly's evil eyes scanned the rows of heads for the guilty party.

"Lads, come on now, let's not be flippant, I'm baring my soul here."

"It'll be your arsehole that wants baring when that sandwich blasts it's way through." It was the same voice, same reaction and again Molly was scanning the crowd.

"Come on lads, let Richie continue."

"Thanks, Jeff, that brings me to one of my main points - in future I would like to be known as Celeste - if it's not too much trouble."

It was all too much for Geordie Pringle who suddenly burst into words. "Effing hell man Rich, you're the last bloke I would have taken for a tail gunner."

"Tish, tish Geordie, its Celeste and would you use such profanities in front of your good lady wife?"

Now even taking into account the circumstances, this was naivete at the highest level. Geordie would feel equally at home swearing in front of the Queen and the Pope let alone his wife. It took on an art form all of it's own, the way he could squeeze so many four letter words into the shortest of sentences.

"You're not going for the full works are you Rich, sorry Celeste, you know, the tuck and tadger removal?"

"It's early days on that one, Paul mate, thanks for your concern."

"Celeste, please do tell, am I right in thinking I spied you earlier wearing long dangly diamante ear furniture with rhinestone inlays and if I am, where did you purchase the same?"

"Yes you're right on all counts, Tristram, I had to remove them because they kept jamming in my welding screen and I bought them in Fenwicks."

He wasn't lying; a lump came to his throat as he remembered how he had taken Linda to get them for her for Christmas.

There was a hushed silence as Richie joined the dinner queue. Wilf and Alec, two caulker-burners man and boy, with the consequence of limited hearing had sat on the edge of the discussion vainly trying to decipher it.

"What's happened, Wilf?"

"I'm not altogether sure, something about someone called Celeste with long dangly things, oh and Richie having his willy off."

"Oh what a waste, I once caught sight of it in the showers, talk about weapons of mass destruction."

"Aye, Wilf, it's brought a few tears to a few eyes in its time."

As Richie waited, deep in thought, for his turn he came face to face with his fiercest adversary - Molly Black, Canteen Commandant. He had once commented to a mate that she reminded him of a walking bouncy castle, but unfortunately the 'bouncy castle' had good hearing and a hate-hate relationship was born. Now Molly was a person you could imagine as petulant from birth, with a top lip that could easily accommodate wing mirrors.

"Hello, Molly dear, would you have any decaf?" Richie asked in a voice that had heads turning in anticipation of the response.

"No! we've only got the same insipid black piss as usual and can I just say, if the words I'm about to impart bring you just a crumb of comfort in these troubled times, I would be deeply saddened, if Richie Lowers, the man, was a failure then Celeste Lowers, the woman, is a disaster."

"Well have, you got any of that papaya and mango flavoured water?" he persisted unabashed.

"No! So bugger off sarky arse."

He picked up a can of diet soda and headed for the till in his new mild-mannered way. He was lucky he had caught Molly in a good mood.

Richie did not rejoin his mates on the centre table, instead he opted for a quieter spot near the door. As he sat he questioned himself on how he had been so stupid. Why last night, had he pushed Linda to such a point where she had issued what he took as a challenge, which Richie being Richie couldn't ignore. In a sudden outburst she had called him a lazy, beer swilling, flatulent sofa slob who was shirking his responsibilities around the house. He had failed badly when trying to alleviate the situation when she had stated, as a woman it was commonplace for her to have to be doing four jobs at once.

"Aye, three of them badly, Pet."

As he turned to face her he saw a look in her eyes that was alien to him. She had been standing ironing and for a worrying second Richie thought the normally placid Linda was going to twot him over the head with it. "Just for one day, you should try being a woman, but then again, as a man you couldn't handle it."

Just after she had slammed the living room door he gave levity one more try. "Flick the switch on the kettle as you're passing, Lyn, there's a love."

A sigh came from the passage not uncommon to a horse. The staircase contained eighteen stairs and as she headed for the bedroom he closely monitored her journey through every one of them. Two hours passed before he felt it safe enough to sneak up to their room. From her underwear drawer he took her best Marks and Sparks black set and a pair of tights. He next ventured into the wardrobe and picked out the first dress he came to. From the dressing table he took a pair of earrings, a lipstick and a blusher.

He was up when the cock crowed the next morning. I'll show her, he thought as he donned her clothes then covered them up with his anorak.

"Morning, Richie," said the gateman as he clocked in. "You're two

hours early, you wet the bed?"

"Got a lot on today, Maurice, got to work on a speech."

As he continued down the yard, a puzzled Maurice shouted after him, "Hey, Richie, have you forgotten to put your trousers on?"

Once in the empty locker room he quickly discarded the dress, hanging it carefully away. Linda's best underwear was then covered by his boilersuit and he replaced the beige slingbacks with a pair of well-worn rigger boots.

Richie's reverie was brought to a halt by the buzzer that signalled a return to work. He made an instant decision to go home and obtained a passout from his strangely understanding foreman. With a bit of luck Linda might not have noticed her missing things. It was Friday, she would be out with her Mam. He turned the key in the back door and cautiously pushed it open calling her name, grateful that there was no answer. Going directly to the bedroom he put back the dress, jewellery and shoes. He hurried back to the kitchen, if he could just get the rest of the clothes washed and dried before she got in, but not for the first time that day, everything in his favour was against him.

Having removed the bra, he was just rolling the tights down when the back door unexpectedly swung open. The scene that greeted the shocked Linda and her mam was one of a 38-year old topless Richie, clad only in a pair of sheer black panties with matching tights at half-mast. "Oh hello, you two, I was just about to rub a couple of things through but I'm sure it can wait 'til later." Never one shy of playing centre-stage, he left for the wings, with as much class as his restricting leg wear would allow.

"Sorry, Linda, I've been stupid." He had finally made an appearance, only after her mother had gone and the kids were safely tucked up in bed.

"Yes, you have."

"I was wrong."

"Yes you were."

"Uncaring."

"Yes."

"Lazy."

"Yes."

"And I've caused embarrassment to you and your mam, feel free to stop me at any time, Pet."

"Yes I will, but experiencing Richie Lowers grovelling is truly something to savour. I wouldn't worry too much about mam she thought it was great. I told her you had been dressing up as a dare for charity but she just couldn't wait to get to her bingo tonight."

As he lay in the remnants of the day, the armistice between them having long since been observed, his mind was working double-time on a plan to explain his bizarre actions at the yard. It was then Linda's words to her mother of dare for charity came to mind. That's it! He thought, but it needed divine intervention. Excitedly he turned and kissed his wife.

"I love you, Linda."

"I love you too, George but you will have to be getting up soon, Richie is due in for his tea." Two-nil she thought to herself as she turned to hide a wicked grin.

He was up by eight on Saturday morning. For the first time in

living memory he was having the weekend off work and taking the family to Flamingoland. By nine he had made the breakfast, taking Linda's up to her and was off to see one of his closest friends, Father Tony at St. Johns. Being early he was first in the queue for confession giving him a chance to say a few prayers for the safe outcome of his plan. When the green light went on he moved into the confessional and knelt down.

"Bless me, Father for I have sinned, it's been two months..."

"Try again, Richie."

"Well I suppose it could have been three."

"If I was to give you a clue, the last time you were in you brought my birthday card, that being in March and now it's August."

"Bless me, Father."

"Let's forget that one and cut to the chase and before you start, I have to tell you Sister Mary Francis was at the bingo last night as was your mother-in-law. Now while Sister Mary's version of events was good, to hear it from the source and with your eloquence I'm thinking I may get a sermon out of this."

"Howway man., Father."

"Only joking, my son, you don't mind if I dunk a McVities in my coffee while I work do you?"

Richie started his long and embarrassing tale. At one point he thought he heard giggling in stereo. As the partition that halved the small cubicle shook there were times he had had to repeat passages of his story two and three times before it finally reached its climax.

"It's just like that Dustin Hoffinan film - Mrs. oh what the devil is it called?"

"Mrs. Doubtfire, Tony and I think you'll find it was Robin Williams."

"That's it, thank you, Brendan."

"Father Brendan are you in there too?"

"Yes I have to confess Richie, when Father Tony spotted you in the front pews and called me on his mobile it was a must, but don't worry think of it as a roll-over week and double absolution."

"Howway, you two play fair, I've come to the solitude of the confessional to pour out my heart and I'm confronted by Barry Norman and Jonathon Ross."

"Be careful in your wording, my son, you could also end up with double penance and I've got a strong feeling the main purpose of your visit today is that you need the church's help. Before that do tell us about Molly again and the bit when you were in the kitchen topless, rolling your tights down. It's such a pity we've missed the deadline for the parish newsletter."

Richie sighingly continued as the once secret giggles had now turned to open laughter.

"Right then, friends and joiners, I'm passing round a list. Against your names there is a pound sign, knowing how generous you all are this is the least amount you would want to contribute to St. John's new organ appeal fund. You will see at the top of the form, the challenge was to exist as a woman for a day, a feat that you all witnessed on Friday and being sworn to secrecy, I could not pre-warn you."

It was Monday dinnertime and Richie was back. The wording and dispatch of his carefully learned speech was pure Sir Larry at the Crucible while his strut and body language was akin to Adolf Hitler and Nuremberg.

"I knew you couldn't be an effing wooly woofter
Rich."

"Thank you,Geordie, that's very reassuring."

"Rich while we're on...." There was a sudden silence as Jonty realised he had filled his mouth too full to continue his line of questioning for the moment. As his jaws were on overdrive to relieve the constriction, long minutes passed before he, after a noisy mouthful of coffee, continued. "No it was just that book you said you'd half read, maybe I could get into it, can I borrow it?"

"Yes of course you can Jonty."

As he was being served with his usual cup of insipid black piss, he leaned across and kissed Molly. A hushed silence flowed over the multitude of seated diners as they awaited Armageddon. "Bless you Molly, my life would be all the more boring without you in it." Richie had spoken in a way as soft and sincere as any could remember.

"Gerroff you pervy saddo!"

If the verbal response was predictable, the red glow in her cheeks as she quickly turned away wasn't.