

Ian Brotherhood

Tales of the Great Unwashed

Auld Pishy was sitting on the wall outside the Health Centre. He was crying because he had no money left to buy cider and fags. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand, then wiped the back of his hand on his breeks.

A bus moved by, and Pishy saw a wee girl looking at him as it slowed for the lights. She was about three or four, and had her mouth open, trying to bite the glass. Pishy tried to smile, but the effort went into a sob which caught his breath and started him coughing. He leaned forward, trying to get a proper cough going so he could fetch up some of the rattly catarrh. When he had finished hacking he wiped his eyes, looked up, and the bus was gone.

He spat the result of the cough into the patch of grass behind the wall. When he turned his head, there was a pair of legs in view, and he didn't know who they belonged to.

It's yourself Pishy, said the legs.

Pishy looked up. The sun behind the figure made it hard for him to make out the facial features, but the voice told him it was Mambo.

Ah Mambo, you're out and about already, said Pishy, and Mambo gathered his coat about his arse and shuffled forward to sit beside Pishy on the wall.

Is it the flu on you again ? asked Mambo.

It's not the flu this time, said Pishy, I was just in there seeing your man and he says I'm done for.

You're done for ? said Mambo.

Aye, I'm done for now he told me. If it's not the cancer it'll be the arthritis, or maybe it'll be the sciatica or the rheumatoids that's burrowing into me every fibre.

So they got the tests back then ? said Mambo, and Pishy tried to remember when he had last met Mambo, what he'd already told him.

Sure enough they done the tests and came back to me and says you'll be needing more of them, so they sent me up the town and put wires and all that on me, a whole day I was up there. They had to get the students and them in to have a look cos they says they never saw the likes of it. It's a miracle I've still the power of sight and common sense as well.

Is that what they told you ? said Mambo as Pishy turned to fire another gob into the pale green grass.

They did, and even with the results they've got now they're telling me there's none conclusive or that, the fellas down in London will have to be taking a look as well to make sure before they break the news to me.

So they must have an idea there ?

I think they know more than they tell, but it's the sorting out of all the things that's causing them the difficulty there. Too many ailments in the one body, it's hard to tease them apart if you like.

So that's why you're crying there, said Mambo.

Who said I was crying ? said Pishy, staring up at his larger friend.

I was watching you there before I came across the road. You're an awful man Pishy, an awful man right enough for wearing your heart on the old sleeve.

It's a bit of the hayfever, nothing more, replied Pishy.

Are you sure it's not just cos you've no cash there to buy fags and booze and that ? asked Mambo, and Pishy looked up again, tried to be stern, but the smile was upon him before he knew it and Mambo took the packet of Mayfair from his pocket and flipped open the lid.

Here now, have a fag and we'll talk about it all.

Pishy took out a smoke, let it wobble between his lips as Mambo located his lighter.

The two friends took a couple of puffs each, looked up the road, then down the road, stood up, and started walking towards The Gate. The town clock struck eleven as they reached the door.

So you can't ask her for a tap. Not even a tenner ? said Mambo.

That's right enough said Pishy, she won't talk at all, not to me anyroad. And for all I tried to help the fucker.

Steady now Pishy, that's your beloved there.

I'm not talking about her. The cat. That's the fella caused all the bother in the first place. It's not like I've ever mistreated the thing or grudged it space. I never stopped her having them things, just so long as they're not coming in the bed at night or making a noise I don't much care what they're about.

Was it the expense then ?

Expense of the cat ? I wouldn't know about that. It gets the same to eat as me, maybe a bit more. That's not a bother anyroad, you're as well cooking for three as two I suppose. No, no, it's that carry-on with the rubber band. The cat was out of sorts. Not that I noticed right enough, but she came to me like that last week, she says, Monty's got a problem, I says what's that then, she says I don't know but he's been eating the ends off the curtains and hawking up balls of hair and that. Sure, that's normal for them fellas I says, they're doing that all the time, it's good for them.

That's well known right enough, said Mambo as he beckoned Liz set them up again. We had that one, that Tabby, God rest her, used to leave them behind the back door there, wee balls of wet thread. She thought it was skinned mice and made me clean them away.

That's right, that's the things. Hairballs. Standard issue for the cats. But no, she says, it's not right. He's pining for something. Pining ? I says to her, pining ? What would the cat be pining for. He's in a fine house and he gets the regular grub. That's as much as the likes of him can hope for, what business has a cat pining for more than that ? So anyroad, it was always going to be my fault, I should have known it from the start, and it's when the spare belt for the hoover arrived, that's the start of it all.

That wouldn't be cleaning up the hairy balls then, not when they're wet.

No, the box it came in. It's a big fucking box like that for a wee strip of rubber. There was two of them right enough, but you don't need a box that size for a couple of belts. Anyway, I gets the thing out the cupboard, takes it into the front room, takes the end off it, sets about it, that's fine. Five minute job. I was hardly started and she's in shouting the odds, screaming about Monty eating the band. The belts was there. One in the machine, the other still in the plastic. What bands are you on about ? I says, and it turns out the bastard made off with the rubber band that was about the box, just a big long thin sort of a lacy band. She saw him in the kitchen, he had it at the door and was eating the thing down, hacking and retching and all that but eating it down anyway. Then she made a bid to grab him but he panicked and went up on the drainer. By the time I gets in he's gone away up the stairs, so it was half an hour we were upstairs there, her clicking her fingers and making likes of chicken noises and all that. I says, will you stop with that clicking and clucking you're just scaring the fucker and she starts up then cause I called it a fucker and the two of us were slanging it out there up in the bedroom. Eventually I came like that I says fuck this, I'm off and she's on then about the money and that's for the leccy, and I was all set to go in town and pay the thing anyway, but

I'll tell you now Mambo, by the time I got to the bottom of the stairs I came like that I says see that twenty, you're right enough it was for leccy burned, and every intention I had to pay it too, but now with your gob and your panic and your nipping I says, I'm away down there now to buy drink and fags and I'll not be back till it's spent.

Was that the Wednesday then ? asked Mambo

That was the Wednesday right enough. That stramash in the Bolthole. Even if I have to apologise another ten times I'll still know in myself that it would never ever have happened if it wasn't for that bastard cat making off with a lacy band, the greedy stupid fucker.

So she heard what happened then ? said Mambo as the new pints arrived.

In the Bolthole ? Jesus no, least not that she says anyway. It was when I got back that same night, I went to the bog and got sorted out, put a cloth on the lump and that, but when I gets down the stairs there she is, she was just in from the shift at the school, so I came like that I says sorry love, about that carry-on and all that, and she's sort of frowning and not talking and that but I knew it was alright. Pension the morra, that'll be first thing I'll be down there pay that leccy and that's my beer money for the weekend gone, but it's no bother and I'm a fool and I'm sorry. So she's sitting there, still not talking but it was that way you know it's going to be alright, the worst's over. It was that millionaire show on, your lass from Wales was just one away from the quarter million when it happened.

Pishy stopped to draw from his pint. Mambo crashed the last two fags.

She was calling for the fifty-fifty so she was, she already used up the other two lives there so she did. So, what's your man Al Gore's wife called, is it Flipper or Tipper ? That was it. Then the door squeaks open and in he comes there, Monty, as bold as you like, strides right across the carpet. Fair enough, I'd a bead in me for sure but I knew the peepers wasn't lying. There was the lacy band hanging out the back end of him, trailing along the carpet it was. She was looking down as well, but I don't know if she noticed right away. It was the best thing at the time, that's what I was thinking anyway, this is the answer to the whole thing, if I can save her Monty from further pain and maybe stop him pining at the same time, so I goes off the seat like that, down on the hunkers, right up behind the thing as fast as I could and got a grab on the end of the band.

You must've been awful fast there.

Like a flash it was, I'm down there and I grabs the end of the band, it's looped round my finger like that, and I yanks at it. So the fella gets some fright and he's up like that, up in the air, straight up like he was blown by a force underneath of him, and twisting his body too, like towards the telly. It's like that way when you see an accident coming, it goes slow motion, but I was sure I had the thing, it was a good grip there behind the crooked finger. I was only trying to do it for his own good as well, get the thing out of him and be done with it. But when he lands he's off towards the door, past me again, but I'm forward on the deck with the band under my hand, couldn't let it go even if I wanted, and I did want to what with the noise coming out of him then. I had to twist to get back upright and he's making a terrible noise altogether, even with him almost out the door and the band a good five feet long there. Jean's screaming like it's her getting the treatment the cat's getting, he's got the ears flat and the teeth out and the spit flying so I came like that, I was a bit panicked myself right enough in case he came at me cos he looked awful serious and that, I says

fuck ye then and lets go of the band and he's lying on his back there with the legs akimbo and I swear you could see the eyes focussing on this lacy band heading back for him but it's too late and it's a noise then I never heard the likes of, worse than any banshee it was.

Right on his fellas too that would've been.

Must've been. You pinged him ! that's what she shouts then, you pinged him ! and she was up and off after him but it was too late, he was away out the door and off into the kitchen, out the flap. You could hear it still swinging when we got in there.

So the lacy band never came out then ?

No no, he was away with it. It was the Friday I found it down by the path there, all chewed up and bits of stuff along it, but it was still in the one piece. But he's still not come back either, so she's still not talking.

Aye, he'll be having a think about it all before he comes back.

'Kin right. I went out there on the Sunday, late on it was too, must've been over midnight, putting the bins out for the morning, and it was when I was coming back in right enough, it wasn't even a noise or that. Clear night, the stars was out grand, but I could feel the eyes you know, like burning into the side of the face there, and I turns just at the back door and looks back and there he is, I could see the silhouette against the gable next door there, it was him alright, just the outline of his head and shoulders. He must've been standing on that divider him next door put up. Looking over the wall he was, looking at me, and it was the shivers right enough cos he just stayed there watching. Thanks be to God I couldn't make out the eyes on him, but the shape went down, just

like you'd think he was getting lowered by some other creature, the shape went down and the tops of the ears went away. It was him though, no doubts about it. He was checking. Checking on me.

Mambo finished the last of his lager, Pishy his cider. Mambo slapped his pockets, drew out half a dozen coppers, then dropped them into the collection tin chained to the bar. The sound of the clattering coppers drew a smile from Liz. Mambo moved fast.

Liz darling, you couldn't see me right for a half bottle till the morning ?

Liz puckered and shook her head.

You boys are well stretched as it is, she said, the best I can do you is a two-litre of White Madness.

They left, Mambo with the cider under his overcoat.

Have you any fags in the house ? asked Mambo.

Pishy shook his head.

Right then. That's it. There's only one course left open to us.

Pishy stopped and looked up at his pal.

We'll have to find Monty, get you back in the good books. It's no use a man having no fags and no booze and creeping about the town crying and feeling sorry for his lot.

Mambo strode on, and Pishy followed.

Jean got home from her shift at the school later than usual. She'd got one of the girls in the office to make photocopies of Monty, then made some posters saying 'Lost. Monty. Reward' It was a bad picture, a bit blurry, but it was the last hope. She'd put one in the Post Office, one in the supermarket and one in the charity shop.

Coming up the path, she knew something was wrong. The front door was ajar, and there were wee chunks of tuna all along the garden fence. She dumped the shopping at the step and went inside.

They were in the good room. Mambo was snoring, flat out, the empty plastic bottle beside him. Her man was asleep in his chair. The air stank of rolled-up fags made out of old cigarette butts. The Weakest Link was almost at the end, and the volume was near enough full.

She went back to the front door to get the shopping. She would have to plank the purse before he woke up. He would be after money for fags and cider. There'd be no peace otherwise. She took out a tenner, then hid the purse in the cupboard behind the porridge. They would go out again, she would get to watch her programmes in peace. She made coffee, then put the two cups on a tray with a plate of cheese pieces.

As she was carrying the tray though, Monty walked out from the good room, curling his tail, rubbing his behind against the skirting. He looked happy enough, and was licking his lips.

Mambo stirred when Jean put the tray down on the table.

Ah Jean, it's yourself, he said.

Jean took the tenner from her pocket, dropped it onto Mambo's chest, then fetched up Monty and went to her room.