

Tales of the Great Unwashed

Frank was happy. He'd always been happy, but he couldn't remember ever feeling as happy as he was now.

He shifted back into fourth and overtook the log-bearing artic. He didn't often overtake, even on this dual carriageway, but hated sitting behind these larger vehicles. The sets of double-wheels were a worry. You never knew where these trucks had been uplifting or delivering, perhaps on open building sites. Da knew of a friend of a friend—a truck had picked up a half-brick lodged between the rear wheels. The friend of the friend had been keeping a safe stopping distance from the lorry. The lorry increased speed, so did the friend of the friend, still maintaining a safe distance. The increased speed gave force enough to the lodged stone, and when it was released from the wheels it followed a trajectory which brought it across the safe distance, through the windscreen and into the head of the friend of the friend's nine year old son in the passenger seat.

Frank felt himself smile as his new two-litre estate surged past the log-bearing truck. Another little problem sorted.

And that's where the new estate and the new house and the new life had come from. Sorting out one problem after another, no matter how small. Directing attention to every possible source of anguish or upset and dealing with it as and when it arose. The early days were distant now, and only ever recollected to bolster the happiness he had found with Francie. The children had been unexpected, but only ever added joy to their lives. Jamie had only just turned two, was safely strapped into his seat, and beside him, her head resting on her brother's shoulder, the older Kelly was already nodding off.

He tightened his right palm about the cushioned steering wheel and gently dropped his left fingers onto Francie's thigh. Her fingers covered his and gently pressed them against the warm denim. He didn't have to look at her to know that she was smiling. Even this, just a simple weekly shopping trip, was a treat.

He veered onto the exit just as the carriageway lamp-masts flickered red. A glance at the digital clock—almost seven o'clock. The clocks would be shifted forward on Sunday, Summer would be official. There would be ever-lengthening evenings in the garden, tinkering with sweet-pea netting and twisting custom-length plastic-coated wire about strategically placed canes; wiping down the brilliant white plastic furniture in advance of a neighbourly visit; exotically varied salad greens tossed and sprinkled with ready-made dressing in the conversation-piece carved mahogany bowl Francie had picked up at the boot-sale; jokes and beer and laughter in open-air, with kids safely asleep upstairs as they drew cardigans and sweat-shirts against the freshening coastal breeze. And conversation. Relaxed, assured exchange between people who had at last found their place in the world. Francie wouldn't say much. She never did. But Frank would speak for both of them, of their happiness, their gratitude, their sense of completeness.

The short-stay car-park was full. Not a problem. The long-stay was slightly further from the

mall, but convenient trolley-parks meant that the kids could be transported to the centre without exertion. Kelly protested at being woken so suddenly after having found sleep, but Jamie was content to sit in the trolley-seat, chubby fingers tightly gripping the thin steel bar. Francie had to delve into her purse for a pound-coin for the other trolley. Kelly refused to be lowered into the seat—at five she was a big girl and wanted freedom to browse and wander, just like her mum.

The floodlights scanning the pyramidal glass mall signalled a wave of drizzle, but Frank saw it and beckoned Francie hurry to the covered pavement leading to the hypermart. The first cold heavy drops of the shower did hit them, but with the walk from the car no more than fifty yards it was little more than a refreshing surprise, and Frank shook his head, feigning shock to Jamie's smiling face, and Jamie responded as he did these days, shaking and aping whatever noise Dad made.

My cup is full. Frank remembered the words from God only knows where. It meant you couldn't want more. I've as much as I can handle. It couldn't get any better because there's no more capacity for happiness, there's no space for additional pleasures. My cup is full, yours can be too. It had always seemed to induce a sort of paralysis in the trainees.

Trainees. Apprentices. Proteges. And wasn't Frank once himself one of them? Hadn't he taken on those roles, played them to their natural, inevitable conclusion, then moved on? The others had only to do likewise, to follow that same process. Simple.

The massive stone obelisk at the entrance to the store was mounted on a brick-built plinth. Frank almost hit the thing, had to stop the faulty trolley, reverse it a yard or so before renegotiating his approach to the revolving doors. He stopped beside the monument, waiting until Francie had got herself, her trolley and Kelly into the segment of moving door. The erection was new, but looked impressively worn, the slogan 'We Care' apparently worn by centuries of weather. Jamie reached out towards the object, curious. Frank knuckle-tapped it. The dull reverberation throughout the structure amused his son. Frank struck the fibreglass skin again with open palm. The deep boom made Jamie shriek delightedly, but a vacant segment of the door was emerging uncontested, so Frank gripped the bar of the trolley and shifted himself and his son into the slowly moving space which would take them inside the store.

Frank's trolley was almost full after half an hour, but a lot of the space was taken up by the huge box of nappies. Two bumper discount packs of best quality disposables in the lurid green toy box which came as a free gift. He scanned a triple-pack of cheese and pineapple family-size pizzas and dropped them atop the toy box. Using the scanner reminded him of being in the menswear department so long ago, his very first job, labelling shirts and socks. So many jobs, so many places, so many people, all still there in his head, names and events of twenty years ago. Unforgettable.

But tomorrow, the better life would continue to

throw up more surprises, more challenges, more names and events to add to the stock. And this new intake of trainees were proving every bit as challenging as any group he'd had in the two years since becoming section manager. It wasn't as if they confronted him directly, but it seemed that the bad press being given to call centres had predisposed many of them to find fault from day one. He had even gone to the trouble of constructing, after appropriate approval from head office, a small area of contemplation in the corner nearest the windows, just by the water-dispenser. He had encouraged those feeling stress to seek a quiet moment there during designated breaks, but he'd yet to see any of his fifty charges taking advantage of the four-foot square Japanese-style stone arrangement. The white stone chips had come from the garden centre, and the grapefruit-sized granite stone was one he had taken from Glencoe as a souvenir of a long week-end with Francie in their courting days. The arrangement was a miniature version of Frank's favourite place in his own garden, a patch which he kept scrupulously clear of leaves dropping from the overhanging cherry tree, and permanently sprinkled with cat repellent so that the carefully raked chuckyies would not be disturbed or soiled. Perhaps his people would appreciate the smaller model if they had the chance to see the original. Last week, early as always for his shift start, he had entered the office to discover a large plastic turd carefully placed alongside the gleaming granite. He had disposed of it before the trainees started, but thought better of raising the subject at the morning pep-talk.

The crack of the jar was dulled as the pasta sauce burst a huge red exclamation mark beneath the trolley. Jamie had palmed it off the shelf and was already reaching for its neighbour. Frank grabbed his son's hand away and tried to settle the shifting container, but the clumsiness of his rescue effort dominoed another off. It landed in the thick crimson green-speckled puddle of chunky tomato and pepper pieces, but did not break. Jamie, mouth open, leaned back, staring up at the huge banks of fluorescent striplights suspended twenty feet overhead, and kicked his legs outward, one welly boot connecting with Frank's groin. Frank closed his eyes, suppressed the cry into a whimper. When he opened his eyes there was a woman with pail and cleaning cart and a DAN-GER-WET FLOOR sign already planted afront the trolley.

I'm sorry hen, I'll pay for it, Frank said, but the woman smiled and shook her head and told him he wouldn't believe how much stuff she had to clear up of an evening, it wasn't worth worrying about. He insisted, but she asked him to move the trolley and seemed not to want to deal with him further.

The sweat on his neck was cold. The shirt would be dirty. It had been a long day, but a fresh one tomorrow. Friday, it would be his lime BHS. The tie would be the one Jamie got him for his birthday. Francie took care of his wardrobe. Never a problem.

No sign of Francie in the Bakery aisle. She might be getting the yoghurts. Kelly moved across

the end of the aisle. Francie must have sent her back to look for them. Frank pushed the trolley faster, had to jerk it straight. He got to the end, but Kelly had gone back down the Italian aisle. He reversed three steps to the bakery, hoping to catch her doubling back. Sure enough, there she was, but again she walked through the distant juncture without glancing his way. Not a problem. They would meet up eventually.

He made sure the trolley was sufficiently distant from the neatly racked bags of morning rolls before removing his overcoat. He was sweating all over. It was always the same in here. Maybe the air conditioning, or the glaring lights. It never happened in the work right enough. Always in here. Uncomfortable. Discomfort. Not a problem. Move to a cooler place. Anyway, he still had to get the meat.

Francie didn't ever get the meat. She was veggie, always had been. But Frank liked his meat, so did the kids. Burgers, but only the best. Quarterpounders for Frank, Spaceburgers for Jamie, pork dinosaurs for Kelly. And maybe a hough. Still cold enough to justify a pot of soup, and Francie would prepare a full pot of pure veg while Frank's ham slow-boiled separately on Saturday afternoon. Sunday dinner, Francie's soup, with customised meat version for the men. A joint to follow as well maybe?

A joint. That lad would have been given his written warning at end of shift this evening. He'd been moved onto twilight on Frank's recommendation. If he couldn't go out partying at night then he wouldn't be turning up half-pissed and reeking for the morning start. Twice he'd been caught away from his station unauthorised, and both times he'd been found in the toilet with a strong

smell of cannabis about the place. No conclusive evidence, and even a body search by Security had revealed nothing more incriminating than a packet of very large cigarette papers. But he was certainly at it, and would know tonight that his coat was on a shoogly peg. Frank would see him tomorrow at shift-change. Probably best to say nothing, but an idea to have Security on their toes just in case. It wouldn't be the first time someone had cracked.

Leaning his torso over the deep chest freezer, the cold air combed his scalp as he selected a twenty-four pack of Spaceburgers. Jamie voiced recognition, and Frank let him briefly brush the frosted box before tossing it into the trolley.

Jamie whined dislike of the unexpected dampness on his fingers, so Frank took the small hand in his and wiped off the moisture finger by finger.

Then Kelly was beside him, trying to climb into the trolley. Frank lifted her up, kissed her on the nose and cuddled her. She laughed and pulled at his ears, but her weight was making such play ever more difficult, and he had to lower her as Francie neared, her trolley now full.

Are you alright love? came the question, and Frank was smiling, nodding, and Francie's hand was at his forehead, her face contorted with worry. She looked suddenly old, like her mother.

Frank left the trolley beside Francie's and moved across to the chilled fresh meat. Huge plastic wrapped gammon joints. Joints. The houghs were usually here. They must have changed the displays.

Kelly had started to cry, Francie was quietly warning her.

Houghs? Frank leaned over the chiller, stared down into the chest. A Reduced section, a burst

packet of drumsticks, one had toppled into a corner and was already partially frozen against the wall along with flecks of what looked like parsley and a bright orange fragment of paper, perhaps from a waffles box. A sellotaped bag of oven chips was only twenty pence.

Frank moved left, keeping both hands on the edge of the unit. They must be here somewhere. Perhaps above. He looked up. At eye level were long flat trays of stewing steak. Further along, Francie's hand on his arm, she was saying something. He turned, saw her mouth moving, but his smile didn't seem to reassure her.

He reached out and picked up a packet, cool plastic, soft inside, but he didn't know what it was. He wondered if it was what he had been looking for, if it was needed or wanted. He fingered the computer-printed label. The small dotted letters formed words, but even after reading them he still didn't know what it was.

Kelly had jumped up and grabbed him from behind. She must want a piggy back. He laughed and groaned and gripped the unit tighter, and Francie's head was also leaning into the chiller, trying to see his face. Jamie was laughing. Frank raised his hands to remove Kelly's, but found only his own shirt, soaked and cold. He turned around, leaned against the cabinet as he slid down. Kelly was way over by Jamie, and both children were watching him as he reached the floor.

Faces framed by distant girders, gently swaying striplights. Eyes closed, Francie's face on his, cherry blossom petals drifted their way towards the Glencoe stone. Somewhere behind them, Jamie and Kelly laughed goodbye.