

“Smile, darlin, it might no happen!” He does this wee laugh, proud o his wit. The jar o pickled eggs on the counter catches ma eye. “Two ninety please,” ah say, picturin pluckin one o the wee slimy baws oot, rollin it in ma palm, fingers clenchin... “Keep the 10p hen – that’ll mibbe cheer ye up eh!” He tuts, pleased wi himsel, tuckin his wrapped single fish under one arm. In ma mind, the pickled egg bursts in ma fist an vinegar dribbles through ma claws. He’s whistlin as he leaves.

“Chirro the noo, Davey,” Tam caws as he loads anither basket o fat chips intae the fryer, then says tae me, “It wouldnae kill ye tae be a bit friendlier ye ken.” Ah wipe ma hands on ma pinnie an put the 10p in the Guide Dogs tin, goin back tae the fridge tae finish restockin the Irn Bru. It’s no even worth gettin intae it wi Tam. He’s awrite as far as bosses go – pays the minimum wage an hus decent enough chat fur his age. Gets a bit crabbit when ah’m oan ma thurd toilet break o a four oor shift but, as ah’ve telt him: when ye’ve goat tae go, ye’ve goat tae go.

Despite the ‘Kingdom Chippy’ sign that’s hammered in above the door, everyone jist kens the place as “Tam’s” an, right enough, Tam kens pretty much everybody in Glenrothes. He’s mega proud o that faded ‘Fife Chip Shop of the Year 2009’ poster in the windae an the clientele seem tae be clingin tae it anaw. The chippy’s in what is apparently cawed a “precinct”, in the shadows o the toon’s worst cooncil flats. Ah’m no a snob or that, but these are, actual, howfin. Tam says it’s where they put the paedos, but his sources are usually a bit questionable. Tam’s also fae the school o ‘Och, he dusnae mean onyhin by it’ when it comes tae creeps like Davey. Dinnae git me wrong, he wouldnae see anyone gaun too far wi me, but the problem is that his idea o too far is, well, too far fae mine. Yer Daveys an Jims an Rabs o the world – aw men o a certain

age wi auld forearm tattoos an bloated corned beef puses – wouldnae hink twice afore commentin on bein served their tea by a braw wee lassie but would be black affrontit if ye suggested they were misogynistic minks.

See before ah got the job at the chippy, ah was actual so soft when it came tae auld men. If ah'd seen an auld man wi a fish supper under his arm, ma brain wouldae constructed a hale story about him bein lonely, wifeless an dugless, away hame tae hiddle over his wee papery tea in a buckled armchair. An see if he happened tae be wearin a baseball cap... Nut. That'd be me - finished, deid, game over. Ah suppose the service industry hardens ye. Cause see now? Ah'm about wan battered sausage innuendo away fae a criminal record.

Sometimes ah wish ah wis mair like ma wee gran. Bold. Dusnae care whit anybody hinks. Husnae entertained the idea o a man since the Eighties. Her cairry-on's a bit much sometimes like. Take, fur example, the weekend. Ah'd thoat, ken what wid be a nice, thoughtful, gran-an-granddaughter hing tae dae thigether? A coffee up the toon centre. Phoned her tae ask; she wis buzzin. Braw. Noo, we're both mair comfortable in Greggs than Starbucks (couldnae tell ye what an oat milk chai latte is if ma life depended on it.) So we're sharin a sausage roll an a crispy cake, she's bletherin oan about the "braw" new optician at Specsavers. He "hus an accent" apparently, which probably meant he's fae Perth or somethin, kennin ma gran. Anywey, aw wis well. Then, efter, we'd got as far doon the toon as Card Factory when ma gran hud, without warnin, squatted an plunged her hand *up* her skurt, howkin about at God knows what. "Aw, Gran!" ah'd hissed, feelin ma soul leave ma body. "Needs must, hen; ma gusset's hingin." An jist like that, tights adjusted, she'd continued on as normal. Some wee boys comin oot The Works looked an started tae say somethin but she eyebawed them an they gave up.

Ma wee gran's voice pops intae ma heid as ah close the fridge door – *Listen, hen; see this 'keepin the heid'? OVERRATIT.* She kens me though – ah'm the

silent an ragin type. That's how everyone hinks ah'm jist quiet, they dinnae ken there's mair there. At least, ah hink there is...

How dae ye git tae be like ma gran though? Does it jist come wi age? See the now, ah ken Davey an that hink ah'm jist a torn-faced teenager, a daft wee lassie. Ah ken what ah hink but ah dinnae ken how tae say hings. How dae ye even git tae be... powerful?

Ah'm just aboot tae head through tae the loo when - "Awrite Tam?" As if ah'd conjured her, ma gran's on the ither side o the counter, arms folded, fleece zipped right up even though it's boilin. She likes tae pop in when ah'm workin - she gets off the bus a stop early on her wey hame fae the Club 3000 bingo fur a bag o chips tae take up the road wi her. Obviously, ma gran kens Tam an Tam kens ma gran - that's the kindae folk they are, Glenrothes fixtures. "Jean, hen, how ye keepin?" "Ah'm no yer hen, Tam Broon, an ah'm keepin jist braw thank you very much." She dusnae need tae ask - he starts shooglin her chips in the oil. Ye kin tell they like each other though.

Ah'm away tae ask aboot her winnins (ma gran's freakishly lucky at the bingo) but am stopped by the arrival of Big Eck, a Tam's regular an probably in ma top three maist-hated. Ken those men that jist gie ye the boak on first sight? Raith Rovers top jist aboot tucked intae his jeans. An the baffies. Ah've nivver seen the man in a proper shoe. The last hing he's needin is another white puddin supper. "White puddin supper an a chip butty on the side, doll." Ah start punchin the prices intae the till. "No smilin the night eh?" Eck says, half tae me, but maistly at Tam. Ma Gran's standin off tae the side, checkin oot the ancient signed photo o some boxer that's framed next tae the menu. Her heavy wee gold earrings rattle a bit.

Between ma full bladder and noo Eck's incredible wit... ah jist cannae make ma face move, ah cannae dae it. "Five pound exactly please," ah say, eyes on

the pickled eggs. He whacks five pound coins doon on the counter wi his meaty fist cause of course he couldnae hand them tae me. “Must be that time o the month eh Tam?!” he caws over the counter an he’s daein this big grotesque laugh showin his missin back teeth an strings o slavers. Tam’s shakin his heid an smilin. Ma gran’s slowly turnin her attention away fae the wall. Ma fingers are grippin the plastic knife, butterin the roll. “Mind n geez plenty vinegar on that butty, hen. Ah’m wantin it moist.” The slaver strings again. Ma gran purses her lips and looks at me. She doesnae say anyhin like. Tam’s scoopin the chips ontae the roll while ah’m haudin it open in its wee styrofoam box. The chip grease and margarine soaks intae the roll.

*How dae ye even git tae be powerful?*

“Ah’m just needin tae get some more vinegar fae through the back” ah say, lookin at ma gran in her wee fleece, solid as anyhin.

*They dinnae ken there’s mair there.*

*And when ye’ve goat tae go, ye’ve goat tae go.*

By the time ah’m back wi the butty an a new bottle, Eck’s awready fired intae his supper - puddin in hand, chowin the heid aff it, mooth slimy wi oil. “Thought ye were makin the vinegar fae scratch ben there” he grunts, an a see the beige mush rollin aboot his tongue. He’s less chirpy now, obviously fed up wi ma miserable pus an heaven forbid he hud tae wait a few minutes on his food.

“That you away up the road then Jean?” Tam asks as he comes over tae salt then wrap ma gran’s parcel. Ah notice she’s added a wee pickled egg intae her

order. She'll huv taken one o her 'wee notions' nae doot. "Aye ah'll see ye efter, Tam." She tries tae gie me the £1.80 but ah wave her away. Tam kens tae take it oot ma pay.

"There's vinegar here, ye daftie!" Tam locates the bottle fae the side o the till. "Aw yeah," ah reply quietly, already pourin generously from the bottle ah'd returned with.

"Extra moist fur ye, Eck..." ah say, raisin ma chin. Daft wee lassie, that's me.

Big Eck's gruntin as he manoeuvres his wey oot the door tryin tae get in aboot his butty an no drop his supper. "Sake," he's mutterin. There's a wee buzz goin through me now. Ah take the warm vinegar bottle an bin it, careful tae wash ma hands thoroughly efter.

Ma gran watches Eck, wan pencilled-on eyebrow raised, cradlin her chips in the crook o her arm. As she goes tae leave, ah smile at her, ma wee gran.

*Keepin the heid, ah hink tae masel. Overratit.*