

PART OF THE UNION

On the bus on the way back home my da was quiet. Usually you could not shut him up. I don't mean that in a bad way. In fact, I loved being on the bus with him. Ever since I was wee he made bus trips dead interesting. We always sat upstairs – and not just so he could smoke. He used to say: *'Up the stair to see much mair!'* Not much of gag, I know, but when I was seven it was a riot. And I learned loads about the old tobacco barons of Glasgow and all that local history that he loved so much. He was always reading... books from the library, books from my granda, and books from the WEA and from second-hand shops and market stalls. The only guy I knew that read as much as him – who wasn't a teacher – was my granda. My da knew loads about local history and he even used to write into Jack House's Old Glasgow column in the *Evening Times*. Once they sent him a fiver for a letter about the old Glasgow weaving union martyrs.

He used to wipe a wee porthole in the steamed-up bus window with the sleeve of his big three-quarter-length corduroy coat – the one that used to go on the bed when it was cold when I was wee. I loved the smell of it, a mix of burnt welder's oil and Woodbines and whisky. Through his porthole he would point out all the old faded signs on the buildings and the old street names and he had a story for every one of them.

I was going to miss these trips, because he was taking driving lessons and soon we would have a car, like everybody else in our new street. But today on the way back he

was quiet, subdued even. We had been to the union office in Hope Street, where he now worked. He now went to work in a suit. He used to wear dungarees. My granda said he had sold out. But my da said granda was a dinosaur and an old tanky Stalinist and we shouldn't listen to him, but I knew he was hurt by what the auld fella said. I knew my da. Folk said I was like him, especially my Nana Annie. She used have a right odd turn of phrase, and used to say things like: *'You're the spit o' yer daddy, so ye are.'* or *'you're yer faither all o'er the back, so ye are.'* It was just one of many things she used to come away with. Another one was reserved for when she got angry with anyone, like the rent man or a council worker or something...then she'd say, *'ah've no' got time to bandy words wi' the likes o' you!'* After she said that the chastened rent man or council worker or whatever tended to go away with their tail between their legs and realise that there was no point in continuing to try to talk with her. She was great. We all used to always visit on a Sunday to their wee room-and-kitchen. She'd make great sweetie dumplings for pudding after the big dinner (me and my wee brother used to say she looked like a dumpling). After our dinner my da and granda would drink whisky and talk for hours and later we'd all go home on the green SMT bus. It was great then, so it was. Not so much now. Granda Coggan, who was an old Red Clydesider, had a big white beard like Karl Marx. When I was wee I thought he was Santa Claus. But he was ill now and his big, beige, belted coat hung on his shoulders. He coughed all the time. But he would never go to a doctor. He never did anything after Nana Annie died – except read – and drink. The wee room-and-kitchen was now a mess. My ma used to go round to clean but he never bothered and it just got filthy again. But he was always ready for an argument with my da. That's why we didn't go round much together now, especially after my old man went full-time union. He was so happy when he got that job. I remember him singing, *'You*

won't get me am part of the union' from that Strawbs' song, as he opened the envelope with the letter telling him about it.

I still used to take soup round to my granda though, when my ma had made too much. *'She's making too much a lot lately,'* my granda would say when I brought it round. He was always pleased to see me and not just because I brought baccy, food and papers with me. He had always encouraged me at school even when I was wee. He was first to see the report card, even in primary school. He used to take it really seriously. He used to say: *'They fear an educated working class, son. Knowledge is power, son, that's why the boss class fear us having it.'* When I was wee I used to just say *'aye, granda'* to everything he said. I did not understand back then. He said the same when I got my O-levels this year.

The union office in Hope Street was great. There was a brass plate outside that in big, black, lacquered letters read: 'THE AMALGATED UNION OF BOILERMAKERS, TINSMITHS, BLACKSMITHS, SHEET METAL WORKERS AND ALLIED TRADES (*est. 1847*)'. That title used to take up the whole front of my da's union card. In the winter sun the brass plate looked grand. Just inside there was an old lift with a concertina gate. Inside it there was a big handle like one a steam train driver would use. When you pulled it made the lift go. At the first floor my da put the handle back and we got off and walked down the big corridor.

On either side there were those old-fashioned, glass-panelled doors, like the ones in the Sam Spade films, you know with the names on the glass. The names were in a semi-circle with job details under them. We went into the one marked: GIACOMO PAGLIACCI: REGIONAL SECRETARY, SCOTLAND WEST. Nobody ever called this guy by his proper name. Everyone called him Jocky Pally, except my granda, he just called him *'that clown Pagliacci.'* He was quite witty, the auld yin was.

Jocky Pally had the door half open when my da and I got there.

‘Gerry how ye doin, brother?’ said Jocky outstretching his pudgy hand. He was as round as he was tall, which was not very, and he had a pencil moustache. His hair was oiled down, slick – he looked like a wee, inflated Clark Cable.

‘An’ how’s that faither o’ yours? Ah heard he’s been no’ well.’ he continued.

‘He’s fine, Jocky, jist fine. Still a stubborn auld bastard but fine.’

‘He’s a real comrade, Gerry. A friend to the working man, you know.’

‘Aye ah know,’ said my da, ‘ah know’

I was laughing inside. I knew the auld yin would spit on Jocky given a chance. Whenever my da mentioned him, my granda used sing: *‘the working class can kiss ma arse, ah’ve got a union job at last,’* to the tune of the Red Flag.

‘And this must be young Gerry?’ Jocky said offering his pudgy hand to me. It was like shaking hands with cold jelly.

‘Aye, hello Mr Pagliacci,’ I said.

‘Hey, yer da’s right you are a clever boy, coming oot wi’ my Sunday name an’ all!’

I just mumbled.

‘Yer da tells me you’re doin’ well at the school. How many O-levels ye done, then?’

‘Seven, Mr...’

‘Hey, call me Jocky. Mr Pagliacci wis my da.’

‘A’right, Jocky’

‘Yer da tells me he’ll get ye a bike when this strike is o’er. Mebbe ye’ll get in time for Christmas, eh?’

‘Some hope. It’s November 27th noo.’

‘Hey ye never know.’

Then he turned to my da.

‘Come into ma office, Gerry. The boy can stay out here.’ He turned to me, and said: ‘Pick a book son and settle by the fire while me and yer da talk business.’

There was another glass door but this one had that misty glass that makes folk look like big silhouettes. All the shadows were magnified by about three times. I sat on a big leather sofa under a picture of the auld ILP MP Jimmy Maxton addressing a May Day rally at the Glasgow Green. My granda was on the picture stood next to Maxton. I sat reading *‘The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists’* while Jocky and my da talked in the office. The big chair and the roaring fire made it feel like one of those gentlemen’s clubs rather a union office. I loved it there. You could not quite make out what they were saying. But it was angry sometimes. I could hear my da’s voice getting louder and make out occasional swearing. Jocky’s voice was always low. Occasionally I’d hear him saying: ‘See sense, Gerry, see sense.’

Each time I glanced up from my book they were more animated. It was like watching that shadow puppet theatre from Prague – only with a Glaswegian soundtrack. The office-door glass magnified every thing in this shadow show. I could pick up bits of what was said. I stopped reading and was thinking when my Da burst out.

‘C’mon, let’s go!’ he said tersely.

Then Jocky came out after him. He seemed a bit flustered.

‘You know it makes sense Gerry,’ he said.

‘No’ in front o’ my boy, for fuck’s sake!’

‘Hey have a happy and prosperous new year, eh?’ Jocky Pally seemed to draw out the word ‘prosperous’ as he winked. I am sure I heard my da mumble ‘bastard’ under his breath as we got into the lift.

On the glum bus ride home there was no impromptu history lesson, no rubbish jokes, just awkward silence punctuated with the occasional small talk. His mind was somewhere else, somewhere other than the No. 62 from Hope Street.

When we got home, my ma and da went into the front room. That’s where they went when they didn’t want me and my brother to hear them. In the old house they used to go into the tenement close. My ma was happy that night and so was my wee brother. He was getting Scalextric for Christmas now. My da had told us the strike would soon be over. Christmas was saved. So why was I not happy? Later that night when my wee brother was asleep my da came into to my room. I had my own room now and that was great.

He said: ‘Yer ma and I are proud of ye this year, wi’ the O-levels an’ that! Mebbe’s we’ll get that bike, eh?’

‘Ah don’t want any bike; I don’t want anything of your ill-gotten gain! You’re a disgrace to my granda and yourself and the working class!’ That’s what I thought I wanted to say. To show some steel, challenge his weakness, show my anger, disappointment. Be a working-class hero like my granda. My granda who gave his son nowt but criticism, who never had two pennies to scratch his arse but was ideologically sound! I don’t know. I wanted to say *something*... granda was right. Or was he? I don’t know. My da is not a bad man. This all flitted through my brain as my old man spoke. I did not want to hurt him. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was scared. Maybe I was weak. So I just mumbled.

‘Aye, that’d be great, da.’

Maybe I did not sound right. Not convincing. I was always convincing to my da. Probably why I got away with so much.

But then my da's attitude changed, like that of a frightened wean.

'Oh fuck, *ye know* don't ye?'

I tried my best to look puzzled, bemused even, to convince him, even reassure. I was a good actor. Drama club with Mr Glass and all those school plays had better pay off.

'Know what? What are ye talking about?'

Then he said something I will never forget.

'Dinnae tell my da... don't say anything tae yer granda.'

'Anything about what? Ah don't know what you're on about.'

He seemed to accept what I was saying. Then got up and walked out. I am sure I saw him well-up before he became a silhouette in the doorway.

But I did know what he had been talking about but admitting that would have killed him. I was old enough and smart enough to know that much. I had seen him taking Jocky's big shadowy packet earlier that day and I had heard enough of their chat. That envelope had looked three-feet wide in that office-door window pane. But how could I say anything? After all, he was my da. No-one wants their da to be hurt, do they? That day at Jocky Pally's office was never spoken of again.

At Christmas I was pleased with my new Claude Butler 10-speed, drop-handlebar racer but I never took it round to my granda's house.