

MADE YOU BOLD, GAVE YOU FIRE

(1270 words)

‘Is that what you said, when all this happened? That it was “entirely his fault”?’ He looks at you expectantly, eyeing your androgenous clothing, your flopping fringe.

You nod, no doubt in your own mind, no need for further comment.

The officer looks up from his paperwork, exasperation oozing from his oversized pores. You notice a spot developing on his chin, wonder if he ever bothers with fruit – or veg. In your head, his blasphemy is pouring forth – “Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” he is screaming, his Irishness coming to the fore. “Just give me a bloody answer.”

Eventually he speaks, the words strangled though, with unwilling patience. ‘Tell me why you said that.’

And you are back. No longer in the station - on the surface being treated like eggshells, but covertly being accused by every pair of shrugging shoulders. You are on the bus. The number 47, top deck, enjoying the views of the once-grand town hall and the path up to the church on the hill, and the occasional glimpses of the sea. Spying on the not so great or good as they go about their purchases – a special-offer Merlot from the Co-op, day-old custard slices, reduced, from the baker, the latest edition of the Radio Times concealing a vape. Your observations roll from one comic-postcard group to another, heads bowed together in spicy gossip or strident complaint. Story after unfolding story, seen from above. Perfect entertainment.

Until *he* stomps up the stairs.

You sigh, guessing he is trouble – the sort who engages in raucous, one-sided conversations from several seats away, doing his best to irritate while not having the courage to speak to your face. You get out your phone in preparation, scrolling through well-read messages, spam emails, looking for any kind of distraction.

But he doesn't shout; doesn't even mutter to himself, as many do. He pauses at the top of the stairs, grabbing the rail as the bus lurches forward, then walks towards you, and sits.

Right next to you.

You look round, checking what you already know. That there is not a single other soul on the top deck. Maybe thirty seats to choose? And he chooses the one right-next-to-you. You sigh, heavy, deliberate, hoping that that, together with your

pointed glance at the emptiness behind you, will prompt him. At least to explain. But no; nothing from him.

You continue to look out of the window, attempting to develop the stories in your head about those you are hovering above. But all is ruined. He has spoiled the moment, kidnapping your entertainment and turning it on its head, shaking all the fun from it, like up-ended pockets on a funfair ride.

You sigh again. Flounce in your seat, fidget. He moves closer.

You pick up your phone again, intent on a loud complaining pointed conversation with Daisy. She will get the nuance immediately, play along, ask outrageous questions which he will be able to hear – from his position, five inches from your ear. But, unusually, Daisy doesn't answer. You leave a message, hoping she will call back quickly. But nothing. Except a snigger from him.

And another shuffle, in your direction.

He runs a hand down his leg, his jeans streaked with something you wouldn't want to name. The hand moves to the side of his leg, which means that he is also running a hand down *your* leg. In your head you are shouting "What the hell do you think you're doing?". But he has a cut on his hand, weeping, ingrained with dirt, and he has a tattoo, of a gun, on his wrist, the barrel pointing down his index finger, and his leg is now jiggling, relentlessly. And you inhale some sense of instability about him, alongside that stale-laundry, alcohol-tinted reek.

You put your phone back in your bag, create a big issue of dragging your coat from under him, and make to stand. He turns in his seat, still looking out of the window, as though searching for a better view.

But blocking your exit, nonetheless.

‘Can I get through please.’ You try to keep your voice neutral, the most natural thing in the world. ‘It’s my stop, coming up...’ It isn’t – you will have two miles to walk from here, and it’s drizzling and your boots leak. But he snorts, reading your thoughts, and for the first time, looking you in the face. And sticks out a leg, wedging his surprisingly expensive trainer against the front of the bus. You raise your foot, ready to step over, but the other leg shoots out, higher still. Impossible to climb over; or clamber under.

You sit again. Not looking, not sighing, not giving him the satisfaction. He continues to lounge, feet up, not a care; knowing he’s won.

You are left, unable to predict what his next move might be, aware that there is no-one here to witness, to help. You try, surreptitiously, to calm your breathing, to give no further cause for him to be pleased with himself. But he picks up on something – the increased rise and fall of your chest perhaps, or your perspiring forehead; whatever it is produces in him an exaggerated, face-slapping belly laugh. As if you’re the greatest joke, and he just can’t stop himself.

And the anger, the indignation, the sense of being trapped, all suddenly fuse together within you, and a bolt like summer lightning shoots through your being.

And that is it. The touch paper, the trigger on the incendiary.

You grab your bag, frenziedly scrabbling for what you know is there, somewhere, amongst the sketch books and the samples of slithering fabric. Find it. Stab him. Side of the neck, scissors, still hanging out as you stumble your way across his tangled limbs, stagger, miss your footing on the stairs, and slide almost from top to bottom. Feeling the bruises before they even blossom.

Back in the room. ‘And why, can I ask, were you carrying an offensive weapon?’ What is it with men and sneering?

So, no sympathy here then. No getting the victim and perpetrator in the appropriate order. And as though a pair of dressmaking scissors were the most rare and unusual thing.

‘My job – my university course, at least.’ In your head it is explanation enough. But not in his. He sighs, stretching out his legs at the side of the desk, too reminiscent by far, of the scene on the bus.

‘Art student – fashion and design.’ You think of the half-made dress on the dummy, back in the studio, awaiting your return. With the slashed red sleeves, and the embroidered bodice. It has pleased you, creating that embellished piece; the tranquil calming of the in and out, in and out, of the needle, as it leads the threads on a merry dance. It is a costume piece, a theatre-based assignment, representing the role of Lady Macbeth.

The woman who is haunted by the dagger. The irony of it makes you smile.

He though is not amused. ‘It’s an offence, obviously – to carry a bladed or pointed weapon on the streets,’ he persists, his opinion of art, and students thereof, written plain on his face as he quotes doggedly from police manuals.

You wonder, exhausted by the repetition of his aimless questioning, as you are eventually led back, shoeless and cold, to your holding cell, about Lady Macbeth, and whether she was responsible for more than one murder? Because you yourself have quite the taste for revenge now, and would appreciate the company of a woman of status.