

sex  
and money

Rose always went through Frank's pockets when she was doing the washing. Often, he left things in them. He'd stomp down to the shower after work, trailing mud and bits of mortar, and just drop his filthy clothes on the bathroom floor.

She found a bus ticket that still had rides on it once. It was in the weeks when the alternator had gone on the Valiant, and he had to get the bus.

'Look what you're throwing away!' she said. There was rather a note of triumph.

Frank said nothing. Just the sight of the bus ticket was a humiliation, and besides, he wouldn't give her the satisfaction of hearing him make excuses.

Another time, she found a phone number on a piece of paper.

'I don't know whether that's important,' she said, handing it to him.

He put it in his pocket, and went back to the form guide. She started picking things up off the table, pulled his plate out from under the paper. He looked up, searched her sharp, pretty face, but it was closed. ‘Are you cross with me?’ he asked.

‘Why would I be cross with you?’ She didn’t have a reason, but the fuming frustration was there anyway. ‘Did you want to know whose phone number it was?’ he said.

‘As if I care whose stupid phone number it is!’ she blurted. She really didn’t.

She wanted praise. Splashing the dishes in the sink, her back to him, she imagined a different conversation.

*‘Oh, thank you! I’d have been in the shit if I’d lost that number! Where would I be without you?’*

*She, smiling, and putting her arms around him, ‘I worry you will lose something really important one day.’*

*He, nibbling her neck with his lips—which reminded her of a horse, so she changed it to him kissing her neck instead—‘so long as I never lose you, that’s all that matters.’*

‘I’m helping Bill Trevelyan today,’ Frank said one morning, folding the sports pages at last. ‘He needs a tree cutting down.’

‘What about our own apricot tree?’ said Rose, ‘when are you going to do that?’

Frank didn’t answer; he pulled on his boots and spoke to the dog instead.

It was a pleasant morning, wielding the powerful chainsaw, and yarning to his old neighbour.

Afterwards, Frank said, ‘I’ll take it away for you next weekend.’ He had no idea how he would do this though; he’d have to hire a ute, and where would he get the money?

‘No, no!’ said Bill. ‘You’ve done enough, I’ll get someone to come. Here!’ and he pulled out a

fifty-dollar note.

Frank was mortified; it changed everything. He pushed Bill’s hand away. ‘No,’ he said in his turn, ‘I just wanted to help.’

But Bill was more determined, and a scene was quickly developing, so Frank took the money. He shoved it in his shirt pocket, because putting it in his wallet would somehow have clinched the thing; he’d have been paid for a service rather than done a favour.

He remembered it several days later, when he saw Dream Run was in the three fifteen at Randwick. He tried to remember what shirt he’d had on that day, but gave up looking after a brief rummage. It had probably fallen out of his pocket. Easy come, easy go, he thought; he wasn’t sorry. It was a shame about Dream Run though, who naturally romped home first.

Rose had felt the stiff, waxy feel of it in his shirt pocket, and pulled it out. A fifty-dollar note! She stood holding it in the humid laundry, ankle deep in dirty shirts and pants. She smoothed out the folds, checked the pocket to see if there was any more—there wasn’t.

Part of it was bafflement. How was it possible to drop fifty dollars on the floor and forget it? How could you put a fifty-dollar note in a shirt pocket to start with?

Part of it was lust. Putting it back would be like trying to take your hand from the warm belly of the man who lay, letting you stroke him, about to fuck you—it couldn’t be done, it was a physical impossibility.

And part of it was an odd sort of exhilaration. The laundry had become a plotter’s den, a spy’s hideout. She listened to Frank turn the taps off in the shower on the other side of the wall. There was no rush to

do anything, yet she felt her moment of discovery was snatched, fraught already with the possibility of being found out.

Afterwards, she couldn't remember actually making a decision to steal from him. It was as if it had already been made, a long time ago, and simply awaited the opportunity.

She didn't, of course, call it stealing. As she slid the note into the pocket of her own jeans, and dropped the shirt into the washing machine—carried on, in fact, as if nothing had happened—she told herself that someone had to take some responsibility.

Someone had to find the money to pay the bills, keep a grip on the finances. There was a grim, but quite diverting sort of poetic justice to it all; he should have a better job, he never gave her enough. When it came to it though, she didn't use the fifty dollars for housekeeping. It was a bonus, a bit of a windfall. It had a whiff about it too, as if it was marked.

She found an old Bushell's tea tin, which had been her mother's. Her mother may even have used it for small change, or perhaps just for buttons. It had a snugly fitting lid, firm without being tight. There was an old-fashioned picture on it, of a smiling, carefree woman, from a time when women could afford to enjoy their tea without worrying about the bills, because their husbands took care of all that. She put the fifty-dollar note in it. Then there was the problem of what to do with the tin. In the end, she put a label on it that said, *Coconut*, and placed it in the furthest corner of the pantry. The very smell of coconut made Frank nauseous.

Of course, the tin implied there would be more.

It needed to rattle, like a good old-fashioned moneybox. It needed to feel heavy when she lifted it, coins and notes mounting, so that she could only

guess how much there was, and counting it would become a secret pleasure.

She tried putting the change from her own purse in it, but there was little satisfaction in this.

Frank woke before her most mornings. He would lie and watch her, the soft brown hair coming out under the blond, her face open to him in sleep. He would think of how things used to be, years ago, when just wanting her was enough. He wanted her as much as he ever did. What did a man have to do? It was this long, steady gaze that brought her to consciousness—she felt it while she was dreaming, knew that she had to be on guard. She'd lie still; there was no discernible change—or so she thought. Her breathing altered the smallest fraction. She wondered if he could hear her heart beating, it sounded so loudly in her own inner ear. And he could, in fact, hear it, along the deep unseen courses that had connected his body to hers from the beginning.

He would sigh, turn over in the end, and heave upright, taking half the bedclothes with him. (Does he do that on purpose? Rose would fume.) He'd sit on the edge of the bed so long that she sometimes thought he'd gone back to sleep again. She'd open one eye and see his freckled back bent forwards, and his fingers rubbing through the faded, rusty curls. He'd pull on the pair of old shorts that doubled as pyjama bottoms, and yesterday's T-shirt, get unsteadily to his feet, and stump out.

Only then would she turn onto her back, and stretch her legs. She'd hear him in the toilet, the water running as he washed, then his receding tread as he went into the kitchen. She would be flooded with a sort of desolation, a fierce, sad, hopeless longing for something that was so near and yet so far, so

apparently within her reach, and yet lost to her. Resentment had become the habit of her life with Frank; she was stuck with it, defeated. She got out of bed, put her dressing gown on, and switched on the heater. She heard him talking to the dog; then the plumbing noises as he turned the taps on and off in the kitchen. He would be making her coffee. His jeans lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. She bent and picked them up, and with a clatter loud enough to wake the dead, a fistful of change slid out of the pocket onto the wooden floor. Her heart pounding, she picked up the money, shoved it back, and laid the jeans down again. The steady, homely sounds still came from the kitchen. Her hands were thrust down in the pockets of her dressing gown; in her right hand was a two-dollar coin. Her fingers opened slowly; unseen, soundless, the coin fell from her hand into the pocket. Then opportunities grew like weeds, once she recognised them, began looking for them. It was all down to his carelessness, laziness, and his impossibly irresponsible attitude towards money. If he took better care, it wouldn't happen. Why did he always have so much change to start with? Because, she said to herself, it was less trouble to use a note than to count out change. The fob pocket of his jeans would be bulging sometimes; she could take out a handful of two-dollar coins. The removal of one or two from such a store would never be noticed. Why did he leave his jeans on the floor? He never put clothes away, never hung anything up. His side of the room, she was fond of saying to herself, was like a bomb site. Of course things got kicked about, trodden on! Of course things would fall out of the pockets! Coins would lie about among the dust and

dirty socks like glittering shells washed up on the beach. Frank's habit was to pick them up later, after he'd got dressed, put his belt on. He'd bend, straining a bit from the effort, reach under the bed for them, toss them briefly in his hand, then pocket them again. He often missed one or two. He had always left money lying around in odd places. The Valiant's ashtray was full of change. He would put change down on the dresser after he'd paid the pizza boy. Sometimes, she went into the bathroom after he'd had a shower, and through the steam, she'd see coins on the floor, along with the detritus of the day, the supermarket receipts, keys and small screwdrivers. She became alert to these habits, these moments. There was a buzz in recognising them. There was an art to it. The art was in the selection—she would never take more than one or two coins. It was also in the timing, the judgement, whether to take an opportunity, or sometimes choose to let it go. The old Bushell's tea tin grew heavier and heavier.

The water was hot on the back of Frank's neck. His head was bent forwards, his eyes shut tight. He was letting it pound him. The temperature was as hot as he could bear it; he was enveloped in a thick cloud of steam. He rocked slowly, making the hard centre of the stream of water travel down his back, then up his neck to his head. It was hypnotic. He could stay like this for a long time, in a sort of trance. Except that he thought of her, always he thought of her. He thought of her arms, reaching to peg the washing on the line, her T-shirt riding up, giving a glimpse of white flesh, like the flash of a seagull's wing. Both her hands occupied with the washing, her breasts would be stretched up and nothing at all in the way

of them, except the little pink T-shirt. He thought of himself putting his hands on that bare bit of flesh from behind, surprising her, going up quickly under the T shirt to her breasts. She'd be shouting by now, 'Stop it!' struggling a bit, her ponytail dancing against his face. But her nipples would be hard, and he'd brush them up and down with his fingers, and she'd stop shouting and lean back against him. Then he'd reach down into her jeans and find what he wanted, it would be all his, wet by now, ready for him.

All the while he thought of this, his cock sprang urgently to his hand. The hot water drummed on his back, and washed half a cake of soap down the drain. He was aware of her shouting, really shouting, as if from a long way away, and there was an angry banging on the bathroom door.

'Have you any idea how long you've been in there?' she was shouting. 'Other people might want to use the bloody bathroom, you know!'

In his mind, he was inside her, filling her with his juice, and she was saying, 'Oh don't stop, please don't stop!' He didn't answer her; silence was his stubborn habit anyway. Why should a man be nagged and harried to death in his own house?

Later, spitting toothpaste into the sink—it had gone quiet outside the door, she'd given up—he thought that it was a mistake that he made, probably, the silence, the stubbornness. It was a habit of defiance; it was like his refusal to get rid of the Valiant, even though the expense was killing him. He saw the way it defeated him.

He had a rush of warm contrition, of fellow feeling. He would surprise her, apologise about the bathroom, and ask her what she'd like to do today. He'd open himself to anything, to please her—coffee, shopping, the lot. He was amused at himself, at both of them, getting so warped and cranky in their

middle age. He felt boyish, and opened the bathroom door as quietly as he could, picked his way down the hall avoiding the creaky floorboards, grinning at himself. She wouldn't be cross for long, not when he said *coffee and cake*.

The bedroom door was open, and he could see her in the mirror. What was she doing on his side of the bed? He stood and watched, holding the towel round himself, his smile receding, the flesh folding down slowly, contracting like his cock under the towel. She was holding his jeans and delving deep in the pocket. She had a look of absorbed concentration, almost excitement. She brought out all the change, dropped the jeans on the bed, picked through the pile of coins and removed several, then pushed the rest back into the pocket and dropped the jeans onto the floor again.

'So what are your plans?' Rose said, gathering up the breakfast things. 'For today, I mean, not the rest of your life.' She attempted humour, but she'd waited half the morning to ask, and he was still squeezing the dregs from the coffee pot and studying the form guide.

'I might just read the paper all day,' Frank said, equally humorously.

She wanted this to just be a normal conversation. Why was it so hard? 'I know this is annoying,' she said, 'but the apricot tree is dangerous. I'm worried a branch may break off and hurt someone.'

He sipped his coffee.

'I've been asking you for weeks,' she said, she couldn't stop herself now. 'The tree is dead! Something has to be done about it!'

'What will you give me?' He looked up at last, his gaze strong and steady.

It was a trick, she knew. Any answer she gave would

be a bad one. 'What on earth do you mean?' she countered.

'Bill gave me fifty dollars for cutting down his tree,' he said, 'although I never got to spend it.' His gaze didn't falter for a second. 'What will you give me?' He knew! She felt the curdling, cringing whip of shame. She could neither think of an answer nor return his gaze. She turned back to the sink, harsh tears flooding her eyes. He had disappointed her in so many ways, and yet here he was accusing her, taking the moral high ground! She felt like a criminal in her own home.

He saw her head bent and the tremor in her shoulders, and a wave of tenderness swamped him. He pushed back his chair, came up behind her. She had the pink T-shirt on, and her hair smelled of her apple shampoo. He put his arms around her, and for a second it seemed as if she leaned against him, as if they were both bathing in a warm lapping tide of forgiveness and love and understanding.

He moved his hand to her breast. With an angry, inarticulate sound, she swiped at the tears and pulled away from him.

'Well, I'll chop the fucking tree down for nothing,' he said. 'All I wanted was a bit of kindness!'

He slammed the back door. She heard the chainsaw sputter into life, then start its angry whining. She thought of the tin; it was finished now. She'd count the money for the last time, and buy something nice for herself at least. She wasn't going to waste it.