

Panacalty

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I'm walking over the bridge towards Monkwearmouth, the wind is buffeting around my ears, making my head throb even more. The clouds are heavy today, grey like dirty dishcloths that need a rinse. The River Wear is flowing quickly, impatient to get out to the North Sea. There are shipbuilding cranes everywhere and seagulls circling, their cry is like a pram wheel that needs oiling.

My head is woozy, and my nostrils are filled with the smell of hops coming up from Vaux brewery. I'm heading over to me mam's. I know what she'll say. But I just need five minutes out of the house to try and clear me head and to get away from all the chores. Today is washing day, shopping day, tidying day, hoovering day. I'm always more tired on my day off doing jobs around the house than I am going to work at Chalkie's. Billy calls what I earn at Chalkie's pin money, but without it there'd be just bread and dripping most nights.

Last night, me and Sharon had gone up to a *Go As You Please* talent night. People had laughed, and it was magic, absolutely magic.

As I'm walking over to my mam's, pulling my jacket round tight against the freezing wind, my mind is racing over what happened.

We'd had a reet good weekend. Saturday we'd gone to see Bobby. The sound of the laughter when Bobby is at the club is like the roar of a wave at Roker Beach, coming in fast, then rushing away, with the tinkling sounds of people cackling long after the joke has finished.

Bobby's jokes never miss a beat:

'The Dole is my shepherd, I shall not work.'

People were banging the tables, laughing and loving every word that came out of Bobby's mouth. He was wearing his tatty woolly gansey, a Woodbine hanging off his fingers, his flat cap on. He's right at home cracking jokes on that stage. Bobby was a legend and there was no one like him. I hankered after that, to tell jokes, and wanted nothing more than to give it a go. But it was a secret, between me and Sharon. If I told anyone else, they'd think I was soft in the head.

Over the years, I watched how Bobby held the crowd. He just needed to walk on the stage to have everyone in bits. He'd tell the jokes like they thought had just occurred to him and he'd just wait sometimes, pause, like he was holding off till just the right moment to drop the last line in.

I'd practice at work, watching people, and gauging the response. But I'd try and do it surreptitiously. There's no way I could say 'listen to me tell some jokes, will you?' Whilst I served up their tatties and onions.

It was like Bobby knew what we were all about and could find just the right thing to make us laugh, like when he thinks he's won the pools.

'There was a knock at oor door last Wednesday mornin'. The man says, 'Am from Littlewoods.' I says, 'God bless ya! Have I won the treble chance?' He says, 'Nah, your wife's up for shoplifting!'

We'd heard most of Bobby's material before, but we always want to hear it again. I'm watching Bobby like a hawk, wondering how he does it. The way he stops a while, the way he knows when to tell the punchline.

My heart's pumping at the thought of getting up on stage at the talent night Sunday. I was doing it partly to shut Sharon up. She was always going on about how funny she thought I was. Laughing at my Bruce Forsyth impressions, asking me to tell her again daft things that happen in the shop. But I was also doing it to prove to myself that I was more than just a lass at Chalkie's selling tatties, turnips and carrots. There had to be something else to life than just that, and if it was telling jokes up on stage then I wanted a go.

There weren't many lasses up there telling jokes at the clubs. I'd seen one or two but they sang and told a couple of jokes between songs. There was no way I could sing though. I'd think of things while I was doing the washing or the shopping, and I'd remember them. No point writing them down. I'd lose them, or Billie would want to know what I was up to other than writing a shopping list.

Bobby was a natural, and that famous in Sunderland there were rumours flying around about how much he could earn at the clubs a night. Figures so high it felt like a fairy tale.

There was no one as good as Bobby. I knew I could never be like that, but I wanted to give it a go and the talent night was the only place I could do it. I never told Billie, he would think I was radge. But to get up there and make people laugh, that was a rare thing to be able to do. When I was watching Bobby, I felt like I was studying the form guide. Watching him closely, trying to unlock the secret of how to make people laugh.

When Bobby's on at a club, it's like the whole of Sunderland is in one room, packed in like hot chips in a deep fryer. At the Percy Main Club, standing there in front of the red curtain on Saturday, Bobby looked like he was a fancy chocolate in a box.

There was no point being late to the club when Bobby was on or you'd never get in, never mind a seat. It's always a rush to get there after work. I had to bolt to the chippy to get our teas. There's never time on a Saturday to make anything, and while I've got the money in my purse it's always nice to get a fish supper.

I get home with the dinners, the paper steaming and smelling of vinegar, my mouth drooling. Come tea time I'm famished. I can never get more than five minutes to myself on a Saturday at work, it's that busy in the shop. Chalkie is always there leaning up against the counter at the back of the shop, weasel-eyed, watching us lasses rake in the cash, while he sips on a brew. He's an old bugger, always trying to cop a feel when you take the sacks of tatties off the back of the van. You have to watch him, but you can't be too cheeky back or you'll lose your job.

When I get in with the fish supper, there's ten minutes wasted trying to get our Micky inside.

He's always with little Gary from the end of the street, kicking the ball up and down. Gary's a year younger than our Micky. His head is shaved and his ear is pierced already. They both go to the Valley Road school. They kick the ball all the way there and back and, like every other lad in Sunderland, they think they're good enough to get on the team.

I'm sure Gary's got light fingers though, so I never let him in the house. He's a canny enough lad and he's always quick to have a laugh. When he laughs though, you can see that his front teeth have gone all black right down to the stump. His mam's been giving him pop in his bottle since he was little, poor bairn. I can always see how hungry Gary is, but there's hardly enough chips and scratchings for me, Micky and Billie, never mind an extra mouth.

Saturdays, Billie always takes Micky to see Uncle Darren during the day, then in the afternoon Mickey kicks the ball with Gary. They've been going up to see Darren awhile now, just to keep him company.

Darren had an accident at the pit last year. It was a bad one, down in the shaft, worst place really. Trapped his leg, stuck in there for ages before they could get him out. Probably never work again. Darren wouldn't say that to Micky though. Micky wants to work down the mines when he's older and Darren wouldn't want to put him off. Besides if Micky doesn't work down the mines, there'll not be much else he can do.

Billie's at the Monkwearmouth pit, like his dad before him. I've had five brothers down there. Keith lost his life young. He just coughed and coughed and never stopped. Then came the blood with every cough, and by the time he was twenty there was nothing left of him, and he died. I loved Keith most, maybe because he wasn't here long.

After tea and hearing how Micky's got on for the day, Billie takes Micky up to his mam's. Then he heads over to the Monkwearmouth Club to see the lads from the pit. I squeeze into me Geordie Jeans, put on a top that's probably showing more boob than necessary, a bit of lippy, and some powder on my face, then leg it up Vilette Road for the bus. I needn't have bothered with the powder mind, because there's that many people in the club my face gets as shiny as a toffee apple, and probably just as red.

We have to dag around waiting for Sharon's fella to sign us into the club when we get there. The Club Rules, big as can be, are on a sign at the door: *Women must be signed in by a member.* And you can only be a member if you're a man.

I hate that bloody rule. Clubs are happy to take our money for the Housie and the beers, but we can't be a member and we can't get in without a man. Makes me gnash my teeth. But no point complaining, because nee bugger listens.

We get to the club by seven. The girls from the shop have saved me a seat and there's a pint already on the table. I never know how they all manage to get there so quickly. They must eat their dinners walking along the road. We do a couple of games of Housie, before Bobby gets on. It's just killing time though and a way for the club to earn more money from us.

The bar's ten deep, people stocking up on two or more pints to see them through the whole show. There's no moving once Bobby's on, everyone's sat still waiting for him to make us laugh.

Julie's there from work, with her fella Dave. She looks lovely, like she always does when she goes out. She's done her hair nice and she's got on one of those tops that has a little bit of sparkle on it.

'Ee Julie, yer looking that nice, pet,' I say to her. She's pullin' down her top a bit more, her tits are wobbling like jelly, but with her dimply smile she can get away with anything that one.

Julie's boyfriend Dave's very canny. He's started managing the electricals department at the Jobling's store and got himself a new car. Julie and Dave are saving to buy a place at the new Peterlee Estate. Until they save enough money though, they're staying at Dave's mam's place. Julie says it's a bit of a strain because there are five other bairns still there, and his Nan. Julie and Dave get their own room, but that means the five bairns and Nan are all in one bedroom.

When we get paid, Julie puts twenty quid down her bra and says, 'The rest is to get me out of that mad house.'

How they're managing to buy a house and have a new car is beyond me. Me and Billie can barely put the tea on the table some nights. Billie and his love for the races doesn't help. I never say anything though, or he turns.

Sharon has blue mascara on. It makes her eyes look strange, like she's heard something surprising. She's smoking one ciggie after another, because she doesn't have time to smoke in the shop. 'I'm gasping,' she says as she lights another, 'I've hardly had time to have a tab all day.'

The bar's packed. People can hardly move from their tables to the bar and back.

There's men buying Babycham for their wives and girlfriends, and blokes buying pints for other blokes.

When Bobby finally comes on, I look round at all the faces: the gadgee on the table next to us laughing so much his face is red all over and there's tears running down his cheeks, like a bairn blubbing on his first day at school. Molly from over the road from us is laughing so hard that she's making a snorting noise, like the train pulling in from Newcastle. Those that smoke are wheezing from laughter. Those that don't smoke might as well be, because the air is thick as a pea souper.

The women have done their hair nicely. Some of them have it piled up high, a couple have got that new-look Purdey cut. It makes it look like a bowl's been popped on their heads and someone's cut around it. Some, Molly included, have still got their head scarves on, pulled over their ears. I'd never wear a scarf at the club, I'd be afraid to miss a joke. Most of the men have big guts, their nylon shirts straining to cover them (it looks like the buttons will pop). Some blokes are scrawny, with beady eyes and a mean look. The runty ones have probably been here since opening time. The more they drink, the scrawnier they seem to get.

It's like a tin of Quality Street's been opened and everyone's looking for their favourite one, faces all shiny and smiling, not crooked and nasty like things usually get in the club.

'A man come to oor door. I says 'Come in, tak a seat.' He says 'I'm coming in to tak the lot.'

The laughter thunders in and Bobby just holds on, sucking on his Woodbine, waits until it dies town, he's got all the time in the world and plenty more jokes to tell.

My back is killing me and my knees are bruised from banging the potato and onion sacks around all day at Chalkie's, but when Bobby's on stage nothing else matters. Not even Anne and her misery at closing time in the shop, passing out the pays like it was her money, like we hadn't earned it.

'Thanks Anne,' I always say, nice as pie, 'You coming out wi' us lasses tonight?' knowing she wouldn't, but just to make it seem like I was bothered about her. She says the same every time though, 'No pet, I'm too old for going out now, I'll be in front of the telly watching me shows.'

She'd be better off having a half a pint with us and a laugh, rather than sitting up there in that council flat all night with her mam. Anne wasn't married. There was talk of some lad years ago, but she never mentioned him, and we never asked. More fool her I always thought, up there in that council flat, then coming back to work miserable again on Monday. You can even forget about your own debt listening to Bobby tell us jokes about his. And when he talks about his wife, well we can all relate to that.

'She shouts from upstairs, 'Bobby can yer fix the string on wa carrier bag?' ... Why? am nae engineer.'

Bobby's Woodbine is almost out, and as the ash drops to the floor he finishes:

'They came into the court and they woz givin' the papers out to the jurors. She shouts 'Bobby, there must be a Housie on before the case!''

His last joke is a cracker, everyone is banging their tables and clapping.

Bobby goes backstage and people wait for him to come out. It's almost as funny seeing him leave the stage with only his tatty gansey on and come out afterwards in a smart suit, a signet ring the size of a penny, and his hair all slicked back.

'You were topper man, reet topper, tell us another one ...' People everywhere trying to shake his hand.

Bobby's taking it in his stride. He's nodding at the lads and winking at all the lasses. Anyone would think he was a rock star or royalty, the way they're all milling around him. Nearly all the lasses are taller than him, but it doesn't seem to matter. They've all got the look of love in their eyes.

The light starts flashing LAST ORDERS over the bar, and though we all love Bobby Thompson, we love the piss even more. Like a pack of seagulls running after a stray chip at Roker Beach, everyone heads to the bar to get their last pint. When we get outside, the piss hits everyone and those shiny faces strained with smiling turn ugly in no time.

I walk home with Sharon. It's freezing, and our breath hits the air like we've smoked ten fags at once. The queue had been a mile long to get to the toilet, so me and Sharon duck behind a back alley. We're swaying on our haunches, our white arses like full moons as we piss away all the pints.

‘If only Chalkie could see us now. He’d say, ‘We could sell this lots at turnips’ and he’d have our bums sold in no time at all. Twenty pence a pound,’ I say as I try not to get piss on me new Geordie Jeans.

‘They should get Bobby off and get you on,’ Sharon says cackling, A bit of ash falls on the rim of her knickers as she pulls them up.

‘Don’t be daft man,’ I say. ‘No one can touch Bobby.’

‘We’ll just see about that tomorrow, eh? Ready for the talent night? What will yer wear? What will you say? Eeh tell them aboot that time in the shop with the carrot ...’

‘I’m going to. Ee Shazza, I’m fairly cacking meself.’

We get to my door and Sharon says, ‘Pet you’ll be grand. You’ve got five minutes up there. You’re funny as, you are. Remember yer lines and win so that you can get on at a real club, get a manager, get away from Chalkie’s and make us laugh.’

‘Don’t get ahead of yerself there, Sharon. We’ve not seen a lass on stage yet telling just jokes. I’ll give it a go. But I think I’ll be a long time yet at Chalkie’s.’

We say goodbye, and when I get in I lean on the door a minute to think on about what the *Go As You Please* will be like. And how I wish I’d had the bottle to ask Bobby some tips.

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The talent night is a blur, an absolute blur.

We get there, and I can hardly think for my guts churning with nerves. I have a sip of me pint, then I get worried that I’ll need the toilet halfway through getting up there.

First, Gerry who works up at Silksworth hospital gets up on the stage, holding a cigarette and a glass of whiskey, his tie all twisted and his shirt collar fraying. Gerry looked all soft and daft, not bad looking, but his voice is shocking. He warbles the words to ‘Dance to me Daddy.’

*Come here, maw little Jacky,
Now aw’ve smoked mi backy,
Let’s hev a bit o’ cracky,
Till the boat comes in.*

He’s just about to get to the chorus line when a few people up the front start booing him, and you can feel the air change.

I’m standing up next to the stage with Sharon. We’ve been talking to Louise who works at Greggs in Grangetown, where we get our lunches from. Louise is looking at me like I’m not quite right when I tell her I’m getting up at the talent night.

Gerry stumbles off the stage, looking a bit sheepish. As he’s coming down the stairs, his marra’ Barry gives him a shove and says, ‘Yer a daft git. Yer not in the bathroom now man, you

sounded like a strangled cat.'

Gerry gets down the last step and swills back his whiskey. He's swaying, and he leans on Barry as he goes to sit down.

Sharon nudges me, 'Go on Elsie, you're up next. You're a crack-up you are, go on.' Sharon is shoving me up the steps to the stage. Everything goes into slow motion. I can see the compere, Joe. He has a suit on and a clipboard. I can see all the faces looking at me, the darts fixtures on the wall, the smoke billowing up in clouds. My mouth is as dry as can be and I wish I had me pint on stage with me. Sharon is shouting:

'Go on Elsie. A joke, tell us all a joke.'

I've never held a microphone and I've never been on a stage, except as a bairn in the Christmas nativity. But that was years ago and I didn't speak, I just pointed to the sky like I had seen a star.

I try to take the microphone off the stand. My heart is thumping, I don't know what I'm doing up there. I feel daft for thinking I could make people laugh. I think of Bobby and wish he were here; just coaxing me on, giving me some tips, and telling me what to do next.

The microphone makes a big high-pitched noise. I give a cough to try and get rid of the dry feeling, and the sound is strange. My guts are like water and I think that if I don't blurt something out then I'll disgrace myself by peeing me pants.

I'm wearing the same as I did from the night before, it's my poshest outfit. I've tugged me top down even further, me face is plastered in powder. I've put that much mascara on that I feel like me eyes will shut down with the weight of it all.

'Nice to see you to see you nice,' I mimic the exact voice of Bruce Forsyth, and I can hear a few people sniggering. The sound of my own voice amplified makes me feel different, like I have this special power.

Sharon's looking up at me, nodding.

'Tell us a joke Elsie, go on!' she yells at me.

I hold the microphone. I don't try and take it off again, I just touch it with the tips of my fingers. The light is bright on me and the room looks different from the stage. I feel like I've gone abroad, and there's sunshine on me making me sweat. There's the sound of the glasses being washed and stacked. The compere is already looking at his watch.

'Come on,' Sharon is shouting, 'Tell us a joke!'

Louise is looking at me, arms folded like she's leaning on her back step gossiping with the neighbour.

My chest feels like I've been running for the bus. I cough again.

'Well,' I say, fascinated by the sound of my voice in the microphone. 'Well, I say to our Billie,

‘the next-door neighbour’s husband makes a cup of tea for his wife every morning, that would be a nice thing, wouldn’t it?’

I can see people just staring up at me.

‘Does he?’ says our Billie, ‘Well maybe I can get him to come over and make you one everyday an’ all.’

Sharon is laughing. The man who just a minute ago was swilling down a pint is laughing. The man whose nose is a bit purple from too many pints is laughing. So is the compere.

My chest has a full feeling, like I’ve had a big surprise.

‘I work at Chalkie’s fruit shop. I was chewing on a bit of carrot while I’m serving a gadgee. I sneeze and this bit of carrot shoots out of my nose and lands on his hand. I look at him, and he looks at me and I say in me best Grangetoon accent: ‘We’ll not charge you for that bit of carrot, pet.’

Laughter, like I’ve switched a light on, pours in. I’m that made up.

‘It would help if you could sing, flower. We’re not that keen on the lasses just telling jokes,’ the compere tells me when I get off stage. They might as well have said drive to the moon and back, there’s no way I can sing. But I hold onto the idea that I am funny, that people laughed, that I can tell a joke.

‘Come back next week and we’ll see if we can get a manager in to listen to you.’ I’m that excited I can hardly concentrate on anything else. Sharon is yelling at me,

‘You’ll be leaving Chalkie’s in no time!’ and I just stare at the next acts, gulping me pint down like I’ve never had a drink before in me life.

There are two awful singers, and a man playing spoons and talking about his pigeons. Me and Sharon fairly skip home.

I get in the door bursting to tell Billie. When I do tell him, the look on his face takes the night away like it never happened.

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I knock at mam’s door. She takes one look at me. ‘Billie been having a go at you again?’ There’s no point in tears but I cry anyway.

‘You went to the talent show? Yer a daft bugger, you. What made you think to do that?’ mam is asking, shocked like I said I stole the Housie money from the club.

‘I just wanted to mek people laugh. I can do it mam, I really can.’

‘People be laughing at you, pet, no doubt about that. I’ll put a brew on. Best thing you can do is stop being a show-off and keep on the good side of Billie.’

When I cross back over the Wear, I look down at the water a very long time. I get home and put the tea on, I'll use up all the left overs for a pan of panacalty. Billie will be home soon, and so will the bairn.

Author Bio

Justine Sless is completing an MA by research in creative writing – her research area is gender and comedy and creative work is a collection of short stories. Justine is a stand-up comedian and former creative director of Melbourne Jewish comedy festival, Justine has toured her comedy and storytelling nationally and internationally. She grew up in Sunderland UK and now resides in Melbourne Australia. *Panacalty* is based on the life of the Sunderland comedy legend Bobby Thompson, and is currently being written as a full-length novel.

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