



'What I heard on the bus'

'£1000 a month for life and *she's* only 28!'

'*She's* got the one on the corner. 3 kids and a Ford Fiesta. *He's* got a job on the Council and wears a suit. Leaves her washing out in the rain. Never bottoms the line with the husband's raggy underpants before she 'angs 'em out. All artex ceilings, she is. Next door's got them lovely plastic Daz daffs in the front bay'.

I can see her. Bugs blood red lipstick, applied Clara bow fashion, is smeared over her spiteful, thoughtless lips. Who is today's victim? The 23 bus bounces through the pothole. The gossip lurches closer to the listening ear on the next seat.

'Scratch cards. Plays them all the time. Car's back seat side pocket's full. Gets 'em from 'Abdul 24hours' on the High Street. His wife says she uses the family allowance. Every week regular, 50 Silk Cut and 5 double dips'.

I can't believe my ears, what have I done to her?

'Won't be giving her Mam nowt - and she needs new teeth. Or her stuck up sister. They're being extended. It'll give 'em a better view of the Comp. Block my view into her kitchen more like. Next door's t'other sides husband's going to that Councillor bloke round West Brom. Serves her right. Pete at the Nags swore they've gone and ordered one of them cars with the sliding doors on tick. In silver If you please. Got 10 seats – plannin' more babbies. Typical do gooder.'

My head spins! She stops for breath and saliva dribbles with vicious excitement onto her King Edwards.

'Course, I've known *that* family for years. Best mates at the Secondary Mod was our 'Enry with 'er Uncle's Brother's Cousin'.

Her Black County accent rises and bifocals slip down her sweaty nose. The head in front strains closer. All ears tune into today's gossip.

'Seen her in 'Sofas R Us' opposite 'Egor's Chippie'. Stroking the double seater in the window with the cut moquette. Speaking to the bloke in charge, all la-di-da. Thinks she's posh and too good for us Tipton locals. Kid's a prefect with a tie and gave our Billy detention. Brought her kids new trainers, didn't even get the latest Adidas's like our Mark's - only went to Sainsbury's. Told our Alisha they 'wear well' - she's the number one checkout. Picks up us dinner when her Supervisor goes to the loo. Should have seen last week's Topside. Perfect fit in her best coat pocket'.

We get off. Together. We've never met but I smile and with effort say 'hello'. She sniffs back. We walk in silence and I struggle not to cry. I open the gate to my home. Her jaw drops, lost for words at last. Slowly I say to her who lives opposite:

'Actually it's £2000 pounds a month. Come in. Enjoy a cuppa and meet my sister. She's just finished her Supervisor's shift at Sainsburys.....'

Christine Greaves

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