

## The Spinster's Tail by Harry Friedland

“Harry, you can’t put the chocolates down there – the bloody children will eat them on the way down the aisle!”

It was the week before Christmas, and I was at my vac job at Clicks in St George’s Street (in those days St George’s Street was an ordinary street for vehicles - before it was gentrified into a mall), and the manager was berating me for displaying those big corny gift-boxes of chocolates in an inappropriate display. We had sold out the boxes with “Merry Christmas” on, but we’d found a stash of boxes with “Happy Passover” labels in a corner of the store room and we’d spent the afternoon pulling those labels off and replacing them with “Merry Christmas” labels. Now, just before closing, he wanted us to get the display ready before tomorrow’s morning rush. The days before Christmas are insane

The staff were already clocking out, I was tired, and along with the other young University students on the shop floor, the last thing I wanted to do now was to repack a chocolate display. But that’s how you learn discipline, so we did it.

When I eventually got out the sky was virtually dark but as I swung a leg over the saddle of my motorbike and kicked the engine into life I looked up and saw a lonely, bent little figure standing at a bus stop across the road and I recognised her immediately. It was Miss Finkelstein, from the cosmetics counter.

I had no idea how old she actually was but to a teenager, it doesn’t take much for an older person to be assessed as ancient. Teenagers are not good judges of age.

Poor old Miss Finkelstein. She was the butt of jokes amongst the staff. It doesn’t look good to have an old crow working at the cosmetics counter: ideally the assistants should be young and gorgeous, cheeky and flirtatious, with sparkling eyes and beautiful faces, perfect skin and nails and expensive clothes – and Miss Finkelstein was none of those things. The staff tormented her, and knowing that she was an emotional wreck, they found it hilarious to bamboozle her and then she would retreat to a store room in tears to take one of her pills, whatever the hell they were.

She was there only by the grace of old Harry Golden, the founder of Clicks Stores: she was one of his first employees when he founded the store and he was a famously loyal boss and there was just no way that he was going to turf her out because she didn’t fit anymore or because she was past retirement age. As far as he was concerned, she could stay as long as she liked, and everyone knew that she

lived under his protection. If she had had private wealth she would clearly have retired, but she was poor, and I heard that she stayed in a dark little one-roomed flat half below ground level in an old block at the bottom of Orange Street.

In her youth she had walked to and from the store but that was no longer an option and she took the bus.

So there she was, a solitary figure at a bus stop in the gloom. I heard that she had never been married and the picture that I was seeing was the story of her life. It occurred to me that she would be going home to her dark silent little flat, and a sudden pang of pity overcame me.

The traffic had already died down and I did an easy U-turn and stopped in front of her. She looked perpetually afraid, like someone who was accustomed to being a victim, and I just wanted to cheer her up. I just wanted to see if I could get a smile onto her face. I don't think she recognised me at first on my bike in the twilight and perhaps she thought I meant to do her some harm, so I greeted her with a big smile and made sure that she knew who she was talking to, but I actually had nothing to say to her after that.

Without thinking it through I just said the first thing that came into my head - "Would you like a ride home?" and even as I said it I knew that that was the dumbest thing that I could have said. To my astonishment her face lit up and she said "Oh! Thanks!" and in one smooth movement she hitched up her dress, gripped my shoulder, swung a leg over the saddle, and plonked herself behind me. She was so light that the bike hardly moved.

I was dumbfounded. What the ... how ... and what do I do now?

"OK!" She said cheerfully, "I'm on!"

"I'm in Orange Street" she said,

"Good" I said, "I grew up there. I know the way"

I pulled off very gently because I had no idea how this was going to go. This was not your usual biker chic.

Almost immediately when the wheels started to turn, she started to scream. It was a long, cracked, drawn-out, high-pitched scream and it didn't stop. She must have paused to draw breath from time to time but in my memory, I only hear this single, unbroken scream in my ears as she dug her fingers into my shoulders. She screamed all the way up St George's, round the corner into Wale, through the next

corner into Long, past the Long Street Swimming baths and up into Annandale Street, screaming her lungs out all the way, then the right turn into Orange.

And then out of the corner of one eye I noticed a foot projecting outward from the bike. Odd, I thought. Then looking to the other side, I saw the other foot. Then it dawned on me: I hadn't explained the passengers' footrests to her and she was keeping her legs rigid in the shape of an inverted "V" to avoid the engine and the rear wheel. Jesus! If I had taken a low corner, her foot would have caught the ground and both of us could have been goners!

Suddenly she was hammering on my back.

"Stop! Stop! You passed it!" she shouted.

I turned and pulled over where she indicated and she clambered off clumsily. I thought she was going to go face-down on the pavement but she recovered with an inch to spare, then she straightened up and suddenly I realised what she looked like. I never rode with a helmet (they weren't compulsory in those days and anyway I hated them) and it had never occurred to me that I shouldn't have taken her without one either.

She looked like one of those children's cartoon characters who was holding a bomb and it went off in her hands. Her tightly-coiffed old woman's thin grey hair had been blown out and back like the sparse Fynbos on Table Mountain in the Southeaster, her dress was bunched up above her knees and her alarmingly thin pale white half-stockinged legs protruded like chicken drumsticks into those terrible old-woman shoes. Her black mascara, dissolved by tears from the cold air in her face, ran backwards in streaks towards her ears and she brandished her little handbag like a weapon.

Despite the fact that we were standing still and the engine was off she was still screaming as if to be heard against noise and wind resistance. Her entire frame was vibrating with nervous energy and she gesticulated with strange, jerky movements. She was a wild, bizarre-looking creature. I decided that I'd better see her in because she looked totally unstable. She might end up in a hedge or something. So, I parked and dismounted.

"So how did you like that?" I asked.

"It was wonderful!" She yelled

"Are you OK?"

"Wonderful!"

“Be careful with that bag!”

“Wonderful!”

There were two old biddies carrying plastic shopping bags standing at the entrance and they stared at her, transfixed, as we turned into the entrance, me with a firm grip on her elbow to try to stabilise her.

“You should get your key out” I said

“Wonderful” she said. The volume was coming down, but she was shaking so badly that she couldn’t get the clip open on her little bag.

“Here, let me do that”

I got them out, put the bag and keys into her hands and turned to go. Thank God, I thought. “Bye!” I called back to her.

“Thank you! That was wonderful! I.....” she shouted back at me. But I wasn't listening anymore and lost the rest of the speech.

And then I got out of there. The two old biddies were still standing at the entrance and I felt their eyes on my back as I pulled away. Finally, I could laugh. I rode home too fast. I was inexplicably exhilarated.

But never again, Miss Finkelstein, never again ...

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### **A word about me:**

Cape Town born and bred. I attended Herzlia School from 1959 to 1971; BA (UCT) in English Literature and Social Anthropology, BA (Hons) (UCT) in English, and finally LLB (UCT) – in 1979. I complied with my national SA military call-up obligations in 1975 but got kicked out for being a communist.

I commenced articles for law at CK Friedlander Kleinman Shandling in 1979 and I stayed on at the firm right up to the time of the firm’s merger with Smith Tabata Buchanan Boyes in 2012, where I practiced as a director. I retired in 2016 but still work part-time.

In my youth I rode motorcycles and hiked and climbed mountains. As a student I spent as much of my time as possible on Clifton and Sandy Bay Beach. I travelled beyond the borders of South Africa for the very first time when I was 45 (my first trip was to Jerusalem) – and never stopped travelling thereafter.

I do not want a tombstone on my grave. Just an old truck radiator, with a number plate with my personal details on. It should rust away after a few years. Nothing lasts forever. All things must pass.

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