

The Battle of Glass Penis Street

(a short satire featuring Granny Annie and her ‘special set of skills’)

The title should – of course – be the Battle of Glass *Penises* (plural) Street – but who can say that?

What a mouthful...

The climax of this story (don’t worry we will get off the silly sexual innuendo right away) takes place on a cold windy strip of cold windy Glasgow where huge, corporate Midas-a-weeping monstrosities compete for the skyline. Within the grotesquely glittering glass and chrome phalluses, the not quite adequate, faux masculine creatures who stuff themselves into suits rather than construction gear each day and are more likely to die of a stroke or a coronary than falling from a large yellow crane, scuttle; imagining themselves great roaring lions when in fact they are lazy, overfed, corporate-castrated bulls. In other words, neither use nor ornament. And yet, how their expensively brogue-clad, silk-tie-wearing, golf-playing, bluffing and competing ends up costing us more than it does them.

So say I. Granny Annie.

And I have survived THREE teenage daughters. They cannot intimidate me.

In the end I used bright yellow paint probably similar to that used on the construction cranes little boys crane their necks to see – however many dolls we give them to play with. Acrylic so it would not run in the rain – on a black canvas pinafore. The sort of piny TV chefs wear. I think they have plastic versions in abattoirs. Years ago I was a contestant on Ready Steady Cook – back in the mid 1990’s a couple of years before I gave up watching TV. Fern Briton was hosting. She was lovely. I didn’t get Ainsley though – who of course everyone wanted. I did win and chose a red pinafore but in the same style and size and material as the one I used as a billboard in this story.

How did it come to this? (is a question we are asking a lot these days...) A convoluted tale indeed. But sometimes you have to stand up for yourself. Sometimes you have to do it even if no one pays attention and you just get chilled to the bone and a bit of a headache. Sometimes you have to do it if everyone who knows you rolls their eyes (though, a few say bloody good for you) because ultimately you will feel better. I've learnt that. Over the years.

I was quite young the first time I did it. Stood up for myself in this particular way. Railed against the dying of the right way to do things... So it is not something you need associate just with being an 'older person'. Yes, I suppose you are meant to get to an age, my age, with grandkids, where you don't care what people think of you. Well, let me tell you, if you've grown up a black woman in a country run for the convenience of privileged white men – and especially if that country built its wealth on the slavery of your ancestors, you lose the give-a-shit-what-people-think early on. In my case it may have happened some time in the 1970s.

The first time was a branch of Benetton in Eldon Square in Newcastle upon Tyne. I had, very uncharacteristically treated myself to a pair of their coloured jeans. Who knows – even I – inured to advertising – may have been taken in by their beautiful ethnically diverse models pouting sulkily out of don't-ignore-me posters looking thin and perfect. Anyhow – instead of schlepping around the charity shops for something/anything that would fit (usually men's trousers because I need them 'without hips' and long) - I went in to Benetton with its clinical empty feel and acid colours and in this case – acid shop girl. I bought a pair. I took them home. I wore them. I felt good, and the zip broke after three wears.

On returning them to the acid shop, the acid girl who had previously been unable to crack a smile couldn't even make eye contact when she refused to give me a refund and, instead grudgingly offered to 'have the jeans repaired'. My argument that if I wanted repaired jeans I'd have just gone to the charity shops (as usual) fell on deaf ears. I was more upset

than such an everyday occurrence warranted. But then there are those of us on the planet who can stand many things but being ripped off and treated like something on the bottom of a shop-girl's shoe ain't one of them – or even two of them.

After wandering the shopping centre in a seething and also strange funk – brought on I think by the slight sneer of acid girl as I'd left the shop – I walked back into the franchise – and in the stark light that was a little like stage lighting, stood in the corner and announced to a small audience that this was the worst shop I'd ever had the misfortune to shop in and they should only shop there if they wanted to be ripped off. I have a voice that carries so I didn't need to shout. Shouting is vulgar. You would get the same effect if you turned off previously loud music and turned on all the lights at a party where everyone was drunk but not drunk enough not to worry what they looked like in unforgiving 3-D. The five shoppers who made up my entire crowd (in that it was like some gigs I've been to), sloped out silently but in a hurry and acid girl turned a funny colour and tried to speak but failed. As I sauntered from the shop she managed to strangle something out about calling the police. And then the magic happened. Even though I didn't get my replacement jeans until the next week (following a phone call to HQ) my fug lifted like – well fog – and I felt fantastic. It was the simple act of standing up for myself that did it and not the over-priced trousers.

Fast forward and I'm buying a small flat. Foolishly I failed to check which of the private energy companies supplied gas and electricity. Now, there was a lot wrong with the little flat but I've renovated a lot of previous properties and am not put off by hard work. In fact something I've also learnt about myself is that I really like to fix things, I mend and make do all sorts of things and that is not the current way of the world is it. We'll go into that another time.

There were rotting mattresses piled at the back – at least 6. No one in the block would take responsibility obviously. I insisted that the seller do something about this prior to completion and, presumably on the seller's

instruction, the council came and took away some of the mattresses. The really disgusting soaked ones on the bottom – possibly with some unspeakable wildlife in residence – were left. No – I don't know why either. Letters to the council failed to elicit any explanation though I did get one of those follow-up auto-responses by email asking if I'd got a reply from the two councillors I contacted. I said 'no' and that was the end of that.

When I rang the tip I found I could pay to have the remaining mattress bits – there was about the equivalent of one and a quarter all told - taken away by the same council for a fee or – if I was lucky enough to be able to afford to run a private car (I am not) I could use the council tip for FREE. Which all sounds like codswallop to me and perhaps explains the increase in fly-tipping.

In the end I left them there until I'd done everything else and collected everything I couldn't fit in the various bins, got a short hire van and took all the stuff to the tip myself.

The place was very run down and both the electrics and gas needed attention. Fitments were broken, dilapidated, it smelled and was alive with such a variety of insect and arachnid life you'd wonder why the lovely Mr Attenborough is so worried about species extinction. The décor was a mix of the glorious ubiquitous magnolia plus some scary purple, bold brown striped wall paper on just one wall in the one bedroom and nuclear green in the kitchen. Shelves parted from walls at the slightest provocation. None of that put me off. BUT if I'd taken one second to check the energy supplier to the property I would not have bought it.

Silly me.

Cut to completion and I was there, the following day with my sleeves rolled up and raring to go – hey presto no gas. No electricity even after I put money on the meter card. After several further failed attempts at the local shop to top-up the meter cards I gave up. I think the shop keeper

was getting sick of me. So day one had to be spent digging over the postage stamp of garden, which turned out to be cursed with ground elder. During this time I was treated to excruciatingly loud rap music. Or rather I should say one excruciatingly loud rap song played over and over by a young white man opposite who – I suspect – in honour of having a real live black person in the street was possibly serenading me? From about 10 am until I left exhausted and dirty and having been unable even to put a kettle on, he'd bludgeoned into me that

'dis niggah aint nevah had dinna wiv da president'.

Poor thing.

By the end of the day I was sweaty, dirty, wondering what the hell I'd got myself into and two of my knuckles were bleeding and so – it felt – were my ears.

Friday night I spent two hours attempting to get through to Scottish Power, the supplier – though they are not Scottish and hadn't provided me with a single amp of power. After being cut off as soon as I got through after my first half hour wait and then re-dialling and waiting some more and repeating this process I finally had a very nice conversation with a very chirpy young man who clicked away convincingly while we chatted and induced me to think all would be well the following day. It wasn't of course but at least this time I had the relevant phone number so could spend more time waiting to get through without a cup of tea and without any way to make any DIY tools work.

Late in the day an engineer was sent out. He sorted the fuse box and meter and told me that if I could get through to Scottish Power then and there he'd do the same for the also-not-working gas meter which appeared to be suffering from the same ailment which he diagnosed as the previous users debt not being cleared as I'd been told it had by the lying little git I'd eventually got through to on the Friday. I rang again only to discover that the wait time just to get through would be over another hour. The nice engineer couldn't wait so although by late

Saturday afternoon I had electricity it was Monday afternoon and yet another phone call and another engineer before I had gas too. I had more than one type of gas though because stress can do that to you...

There was much digging of ground elder and then unnecessary faffing while I waited for normal services to be established and that poor niggah still never got his lunch.

From the Benetton incident you will know that I did not take this lying down.

I initially registered a customer complaint. Nothing. I emailed their head office and eventually entered into email correspondence with a very pleasant young woman who, I am sure I would have liked if we'd met on a train and entered into casual conversation – not that folk do that. They are plugged into headphones or staring at screens or getting loudly drunk. There don't seem to be any other options, except for me. I stare out of the windows. Why would you not if you are lucky enough to be seated on a moving train?

After many days of exchanges and expressions of sympathy and the nice young woman conferring with her Chief, an offer of £50 was made for the wasted hours upon hours on the phone, wasted time, a day and a half where I couldn't get hot water or a cup of tea or power any tools and almost four days where I couldn't get hot water and even clean myself or start the job of cleaning the flat or renovating it. We concluded that there was no solution. I registered an Ombudsman complaint which felt like writing a postcard about a slightly disappointing trip when in fact you'd contracted norovirus in the mouldy, cockroach-infested hotel of a partially complete holiday complex built next to the town landfill.

The Ombudsman service accepted my complaint. Then they rejected it weeks later at the request of Scottish Power because there was a different department that wanted me to complain to them and restart

the whole rigmarole again from the beginning. I did get an apology from the Ombudsman service for their ineptitude. Yay. Go me.

And that is how we get to the yellow paint on the black piny. No. I wasn't going to spend the next however many weeks having the same conversation with a different section of Scottish Power's myriad of suddenly concerned employees but neither was I going to walk away. Dis niggah fully intended to have dinnah wiv da president – so to speak.

So – I painted something not very flattering but not rude on the front of the black piny in yellow acrylic paint and caught the train to Charing Cross in Glasgow and walked about 3 minutes to the front of their HUGE corporate building, arriving outside the impressive main entrance on the coldest, windiest day September had to offer after a burning August and just stood. And just stood. I faced the road by a pillar in front of the yawning entry with the wind and rain coming at me like a spiteful vindictive corporate arrows trying to drive me away with discomfort. No chance.

And I do not own a smart phone so there were no selfies. Many folk either didn't notice me or ignored me the way you do when you see someone who is clearly not right in the head. But some folk did notice because there aren't many old mixed-race women standing outside those huge corporate buildings wearing a black piny in the wind and rain and just **STANDING**.

People passing on the busses looked and some were startled into smiles. Some white van drivers hooted and waved. Taxi drivers looked sideways and smirked. People walking – and there were hardly any – it's the kind of place where you arrive in a big car or a black cab and are deposited exactly opposite the entrance, even the wind doesn't stop – studiously avoided noticing me. But – after about 20 minutes – some corporate types were ejaculated from the brittle phallus, minus jackets. They wandered out apparently aimlessly – peering up and down the street as if they were searching for their lost souls and then swung around artfully,

not having found what they were apparently looking for, so they could observe me without appearing to and then disappeared back inside.

Office workers in the glass penis opposite stood at their windows to enjoy the unusual lunchtime diversion. I did feel pretty much like a freak art installation in the worst gallery in the world.

Then two security guards – clearly on orders – came out - looked at me bemused – realised there was nothing you can really do with a granny standing quietly in a piny – albeit she may be shivering and wearing a logo that says your company is “rubbish” – and went back in. After about an hour I started to get really cold and struggled desperately to keep what may have remained – or not – of my dignity – by clenching my jaws to stop my teeth from chattering so badly that they might break. My teeth are all filled and probably weak. It’s my generation’s curse. And that was when they sent out *The Simon*.

I’m sure every large corporation keeps a *Simon* somewhere, along with a copy of their consciences on a detachable memory stick which is shoved in an old cardboard box then chucked at the back of the dusty broom cupboard. He looks as if he should be a social worker and sounds remarkably like one. He dresses not like the other corporate blobs but like a Geography teacher. Anyway –they had one and the first thing he did after walking up to me in a measured, unthreatening way was invite me in for a cup of tea and a chat INSIDE. You could practically hear them barking instructions

Whatever you do together off the street

I declined. He asked me my name. I said if he wanted to talk to me there was a two hour wait. He said ‘ah’ and then blethered on about how this was the corporate office and not retail (booh hiss) and if I came in he *promised* he’d sort out whatever was wrong which – he was sure – was very bad to have upset me so. You had to hand it to him. If their ‘Simon’ thought he could ‘sort out what was wrong’ he must secretly have the powers of Zeus.

I declined all and he eventually gave in when I assured him I'd be leaving soon anyhow having achieved what I set out for. He looked very puzzled so I did not keep him in suspense. I felt better, I told him and that was the point. I felt immeasurably better – about myself.

As I left Glass Penis St, I was so cold, so absolutely numb I could hardly get my coat on. So cold and so very content. And once I was seated on the very warm train with my coat covering the black piny I was not only warm but singingly happy.

The End