

## Where the High St meets Star Hill

We meet for coffee at half ten in Norma's Cafe, where they have tables outside and Sharon can smoke. We catch up on some of our news, then hit the charity shops: Mind, British Red Cross, Oxfam, Barnardos, and by that time it's twelve, and Ye Arrow is open for lunch. We have vegetable wraps and chips at £4.95. This is the first time Sharon eats that day, as she doesn't do breakfast, but she will have filled up on tea and cigarettes during the morning.

I've suggested eating somewhere different, something different. We went to the Eagle once – my treat, as I was flush – and had two meals for £8, fish and chips. She said she liked it, at the time, but the next time we met she said she didn't really, and we went back to Ye Arrow. So if I get tired of the same pub, the same meal, I order different food.

Sharon drinks Pernod and lemonade on ice in a tall glass. Sometimes I have fizzy water, sometimes dry white wine, occasionally a half of cider. The last of these surprised her, when we last ate out. She'd never known me to drink cider. I like a change; Sharon likes things to stay the same.

In the summer, we sit outside in the smokers' area. When it's cold or wet we sit indoors, and Sharon nips out for a cig. We admire each other's charity shop bargains, catch up on how things are with my other half and my daughters, her other half and her sons. Sometimes I complain about this and that; Sharon rarely does.

After lunch, we do the charity shops at the other end of the High St: Hospices of Hope; Sue Ryder and Cancer Research. Hospices of Hope has a bargain rail outside, £1 an item. Sharon rummages through this while I look inside, then she catches me up. She likes the bric-a-brac as well as the clothes. She finds things that other people would like: for her neighbour that keeps all the cats and has Alzheimers'; for her friend that drinks, but has spells on the wagon; Christmas and birthday presents for friends and family, which she buys all year round and keeps for the right occasion. For herself, she buys jeans and tops with a bit of sparkle on them, sequins and studs; things for her kitchen; bits of furniture for her home. Sometimes the things she buys are too heavy or bulky for her to carry, and she leaves them to be collected by her boyfriend.

I like to be in good time for my train, so we say goodbye ten minutes before it's due, standing outside the shop that sells flowers on one side and work boots on the other, where the High St meets Star Hill. It's a quick peck on the cheek, a smile, and a promise to meet again in a few weeks.

We don't meet in August. When I call at the end of the month, Sharon says she's been in hospital and doesn't know why. Her boyfriend had found her unconscious, at home, and called an ambulance. She was 'out of it' on the ward, confused. Sharon has mental health problems, and has spells in hospital, but this sounds different. She doesn't want to arrange for us to meet; she is too tired to go out. I have a minor operation lined up in September, so we agree to meet when I've recovered, when Sharon has regained some energy.

At the end of October I get an email from a member of Sharon's family. Sharon is in hospital. It's cancer, malignant tumours in her stomach and liver. I see her in hospital, thin and weak but cheerful, as is her way. We joke that we have both complained about gaining weight, we missed our skinny days, but this isn't the way to do it.

November, two weeks on from diagnosis, she is home, and my husband Bob and I arrive to take her out to Norma's cafe. She is skeletal, yellow-tinged, wonders whether she'll be able to make it to the car, to the cafe, but somehow we get there. Two cappuccinos, mine a decaff, and she fancies a packet of Quavers, so that's what I get her. She is exhausted after twenty minutes, so Bob goes to get the car, to bring it as close as possible. She asks to sit outside in the cold air. She has spent weeks indoors, staring out the window, too tired for TV, bored of the radio. 'I do love you, Sharon,' I say. She giggles. She and I don't say things like that to each other. 'I love you too,' she says, and gives me a peck on the cheek.

I doubt that we'll do the charity shops again, Sharon and I. If we ever do, I shan't complain about going to Ye Arrow, about having vegetable wraps and chips again. Just one more time would be enough: Pernod and lemonade on ice in a tall glass for Sharon; dry white wine for me. Outside, so Sharon can have a ciggie. One more peck on the cheek when we say goodbye, where the High St meets Star Hill.

© *Maria McCarthy, 2010*