

## Shauna's Story

The blue light strobed his face as his eyes squinted painfully at the glowing buttons, each flashing so brightly he felt his pupils ache from the effort of staring. A spindly hand reached out, shaking as it pushed down on what would hopefully be the correct button. Hope kindled inside him, a fire nursed to health by the blissful sight of a screen that was no longer flashing its meaningless jumble of numbers and words. Picking up his bag, he was finally ready to leave when the horrible beeping flooded his ears once more. He turned despairingly back, the screen bathing him in an unforgiving red light. With a sigh, he set down his bag, searching in vain for the correct button.

Over the wailing of the machine, he could make out the sound of voices grumbling with impatience:

"Hurry up!"

"We've been waiting for ages!"

"What's taking so long?"

"Can't you go any faster?"

"It's not that hard you know!" and most painful of all,

"Come on, speed it up Grandad, unlike you, we've actually got lives to get back to!"

Amy checked her watch – if they were quick, they could still catch the movie.

"Mum, why is he taking so long?!"

"Just be patient, we have no idea what he's been through."

"You're right" she barked, anger rising. "I have no idea... why he is taking so long! Old age maybe?!".

Her mum sighed, "You know, when I was your age..."

"Oh no, not again." Amy's eyes rolled theatrically.

"Oh yes." Her mother was immune to her disdain. "This is a true story, and it began many years before you were born, in a magical time called the eighties..."

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He tried to hug the ground as the shock wave slammed into him, glowing shrapnel from the shell igniting the wrecked tank on his left. His hands clasped his head, vainly trying to shut out the hammering in his skull that seemed to make his whole body vibrate. Squeezing his eyes tightly shut, he reached down, gripping his rifle as he willed the shaking to subside. His mates needed him.

His eyes snapped open, squinting at the sudden brightness as he tried to adjust to the glare. Trembling still, he forced himself back to the present, trying to shake off the seventy-year-old memory of what he wished was just a nightmare. He glanced at his watch, then strained to read the bus stop timetable. He'd need to hurry. Leaning heavily on his cane, he struggled aboard the newly arrived bus. Reaching into his wallet, he noticed only then how little money he had.

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"And how could you know all that?" Amy scoffed.

"Because he told me." Her mum replied simply.

"But-"

"Just listen, Amy." The girl subsided into truculent silence.

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He was so smartly dressed. Tan trousers and a blazer covered in medals. I saw him get on the bus, and then get right back off before it had even moved. He headed over to an ATM. I was on my way to school and hardly paid any attention after that, but as I went past, he was just staring at the machine with this anxious expression on his face. Something inside me just told me to stop and help him.

I tapped his arm and said - "My name is Shauna, what's your name?" He blinked, turned to me slowly, and replied "My name is Bernard, it's very nice to meet you young lady."

The way he said it made me feel so sad. He looked so full of despair it almost broke my heart.

So, I asked "Are you ok? I can help you if you want."

"Oh, I'm fine, don't you bother about a foolish old man."

But I could see that's not what he wanted to say. I tried again.

"Are you sure?" He seemed to wilt.

"It's silly I know, but I can't stand the noise you see. I wouldn't normally use the machine, but I need some money to pay for my bus fare and the bank isn't open yet. I can't wait - I have an appointment and mustn't be late. I would love your help, but won't it make you late for school?"

"Oh, I don't mind if I'm a few minutes late, of course I can help!"

I asked him how much he wanted to withdraw, and with the tap of a few buttons, the machine started working. I thought he'd be happy, but then I saw how uncomfortable the sound was making him - it was the rollers inside the machine, squeaking as they churned out a crisp new note.

After an eternity, the sound stopped, and I handed him his money.

He thanked me and was about to leave when I called out to him: "Sir, can I ask you a question?"

"Of course." he replied.

"Why don't you like the sound of the machine?" He hesitated.

"It reminds me of... something that happened when I was a soldier."

"Oh! That's what all your medals are for! That's amazing, thank you so much. I love history. Could you tell me about it? If you don't mind, of course?"

"Well, yes, I suppose. Actually, sometimes talking helps." he began. Then I blurted, "And where's your appointment?"

"I'm going to give a talk at Shelton School. About the Great War".

"No way! That's my school! You don't need the bus; I can walk you there!"

We headed slowly off, arm in arm, with big smiles on our faces, chatting the whole way.

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"So, you see, Amy, that old man's not wasting your time. He's a book full of stories, and memories, and experiences. All you have to do, is look inside."

Amy gives her mum's hand a squeeze, then walks to the old man struggling at the check-out and says:

"Hello sir, my name's Amy, let me help you."