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## The Line

by Fran Duffield

Everybody in her world knew that regular work was only another name for being robbed and dying of boredom. She'd stuck with the day job for a while because of the kid: she'd give him the shirt off her back, even though his father was a pompous self-righteous git.

But a bit of basic arithmetic showed she couldn't live on the pittance they paid her, so a little creative thinking was needed. Easy enough in Moseley, she knew everyone and they knew her. Nobody was bothered, the number 50 bus reeked of it, the upstairs deck swirled with a cloud of weed. The driver was too scared to say anything, and the police ignored it, bigger fish to fry.

So the bit of weekend dealing down the Fighting Cocks spread into the week: Acafess, but you had to be careful there, don't want to tread on the toes of the Yardies. Not the men to cross. The Traf was always a cert, it wasn't so exposed being off the main road, and the tabs went well there. Moseley Dance was ok for a little bit of soft stuff, but too many straight people slumming on a Friday night to be safe.

Prince could always be relied on for supplies and he wasn't dangerous. Unlike Pete, whose teeth told you what he'd been doing for the last decade, and whose skeletal body could leap into surprising action when he was riled. She wasn't sure about the invite to meet some new contacts in Bristol, but Prince was going, so it would be a good idea to show she was on side: she didn't want to get replaced, after all.

The meet up was very unlikely: an empty new build on a half-finished estate that Pete's cousin Gordon had been working on. She'd bumped the car to a standstill in a rut, and picked her way through mud and planks in the dusk, swearing as she twisted her ankle and wrecked her decent shoes.

The lads were all slouched around a cheap glass table which was already covered in beer cans, rizla packets and crumbs of tobacco and weed.

Prince grinned a wide smile of welcome, and Pete nodded and shot her a wary look.

“Ya alright, Jude?” he said, “we thought you weren’t comin.” She slung her bag under the table with a hard laugh.

“Had to get the kid to his dad’s and the traffic was fucking awful,” she said, flopping onto the vacant chair.

“Here,” said Prince in a soothing voice, “have a beer, and chill out, girl”

She grabbed the can. She needed the first drink to stop the shakes.

”Cheers!” she said, through the hissing of the ring pull.

Pete leaned forward, baring his discoloured teeth in a sly half-smile, and looked around the group. “Are you ready then, lads?”

There was a haphazard muttering of agreement, and Pete went out to the kitchen, returning with a substantial cardboard box proclaiming its contents as medical supplies.

Judy stared at the box in the centre of the table, under the reflected glare of the overhead spotlights. Pete cocked his head and grinned at her.

“It ain’t your ordinary medicine,” he said, “but it’ll do us a power of good.”

The others laughed, Prince’s deep chuckle dominating the male voice chorus.

Pete unwrapped the precious contents, and they all stood to peer inside. Prince whistled.

“Lord a’ mercy, man!” he said, “where d’ya get that much from? NO, I ain’t asking,” he added hastily, seeing Pete’s eyes narrow.

Pete gingerly unwrapped a corner of the parcel and pulled out a small plastic bag.

“Thought we should get to sample the goods, eh boys? We deserve it!” They all waited patiently while Pete drew out a line on the smeared glass tabletop, and took their turns.

“Come on then Jude,” said Pete, handing her the gear. She shivered.

“No thanks mate,” she said, “It’ll have to wait for the weekend, I gotta get back to pick the kid up.” Pete turned away with a sneer.

“Up to you babe,” he said, ready for his turn. He stopped mid action, and followed Judy’s gaze. Gordon had gone deadly white, and leant his head on his arms across the table. Prince suddenly doubled up and hit the floor. The two Bristol boys were slumped half off their chairs, faces like chalk.

Something had gone wrong. Pete froze, staring in uncertainty from face to face, then stepped over and felt Gordon's wrist. He slipped to his knees.

"No, man, no!" he wailed.

Judy reached for her bag and slid swiftly to the front door, flying somehow over the mud, and jumped shaking into the driver's seat. She could hear Pete still shouting and screaming inside the echoing house, but she revved the reluctant car out of the rutted track and onto the road. The line had been crossed.