

## **ANTHONY AND MONICA**

**(The World According To Webber and Son Formal Wear Hire)**

By CHRISTOPHER OWEN

Jack Metcalf and Harry Kent were up at the bar in the Queens Arms one evening, with the customary sound of old-time songs and popular operatic arias being played on the stereo in the upstairs flat by Peter the landlord's wife, Tina, when the conversation got round to young Anthony and Monica who used to come into the pub from time to time in days gone by.

'That was tragic, that was,' Jack recalled, 'What happened to that young woman, it was beyond belief.'

'Never a truer word,' Harry concurred.

'It was beyond human comprehension,' Derek, him with his stomach resting up against the bar counter, his bearded collie down at his feet, remarked.

'She were a lovely girl, she were,' Ernie called over from his seat under the out-of-date Britvic Orange advert', him in his hat on for evermore and a day, with his wire-frame bottle-glass specs and his droopy old-fashioned moustache.

'What happened to her?' asked Morris, the young man down from Leeds for the Motor Show.

‘Yes, what happened?’ Julia, his young lady companion, eagerly enquired.

‘It’s a long story this one,’ Jack assured the young couple, the two of them newcomers to the Queen’s Arms and seated side by side on the upholstered seating beneath the bay window, him with his pint of Fosters lager, her with her gin and tonic.

For Jack and Harry to be offered the opportunity to recall people and events from the past, and in the presence of those new to the Queen’s Arms, was an occasion much prized by them. It was no less welcomed by their regular drinking companions who, as ever, were ready and willing to render assistance in the service of the narrative whenever they felt the call to do so. It could be said that such an opportunity provided an evening with, as Jack might say, a certain animus, a purpose and structure.

‘It were a terrible business all over,’ Muriel assured the young couple, her in her blue-grey coat with the fake fur collar, her seated against the wall under the abstract picture entitled Assorted Fruits.

‘At the time of which I speak,’ Jack began, ‘Anthony’s Monica must have been all of ten and a half stone. In those days,’ he surmised, ‘Monica’s measurements at a rough estimate were chest 40, regular arm, waist 36 – halve it, 18 – inside leg 30. With regard to the aforesaid halving of the

waist measurement, you may be interested to know, Morris, Julia, that before we retired, Harry Kent and I, Jack Metcalf here, were, for over thirty years, floor assistants at Webber and Son Formal Wear Hire in London's West End. It was the custom at Webber and Son Formal Wear Hire for the gentleman's waist measurement to be halved.'

'We take the gentleman's measurements,' Harry explained to the young visitors, 'his waist, it was, say, 42, we halve it. We say to the gentleman, "Waist 21, sir, thank you, sir". It was a tradition. It was understood as a show of respect toward the gentleman, wasn't it, Jack?'

'It was,' Jack concurred, 'As I say,' he continued, 'Monica, at little more than a glance, she was approximately chest 40, regular arm, waist 36 – halve it, 18 – inside leg 30.'

'She was the comfortable type,' Harry affirmed, 'She was homely,'

'She was always laughing, wasn't she?' Jack declared, 'She was full of the joys of her young life.'

'It was a jolly sad business altogether,' consultant psychiatrist Dr James called, him up at the far end of the bar counter with his pints of Younger's and double scotches.

'Anthony and Monica, it was truly upsetting what happened there. No mistake,' Harry lamented.

'That's it, Harry,' Jack said.

‘Anthony, he was an artist – a conceptual artist,’ Jack expounded.

‘Conceptual,’ Harry echoed, ‘He was making a name for himself even those days, wasn’t he? Eh?’

‘He was, Harry. He was in the running for the Turner, so we understood it, eh? He works with tin cans, bits of stick.’

‘Anthony, he’s the artist who works with the blue tac, that’s him, isn’t it?’ Harry said.

‘No, no, not the blue tac, Harry,’ Jack corrected him. ‘The artist who works with the blue tac, he was one of them who won the Turner. The blue tac artist, he’s up there with the Gods in the world of the conceptual. The blue tac fella, he’s in the premiership, so to speak, like Manchester United. Anthony, as I understand it, he’s at most in the Championship, like Blackburn. Although he and Blackburn are on the rise or so I am given to believe. Anthony, he’s causing quite a stir among the conceptual art lovers worldwide with his tin cans and bits of string.’

‘None of that blue tac and that, then?’ Harry queried.

‘No, no, no. That was the other fella,’ Jack assured him, ‘No doubt, Anthony, he’s kicking himself, him not thinking up the blue tac idea, but the other fella, he comes up with it first. That’s the idea in the world of the conceptual. It’s him what comes up with something first what gets the prize.’

‘The fella who won the Turner, a few years back now, he won it with the elephant shit, didn’t he?’ Derek contended.

‘That’s it, Derek,’ Jack was happy to confirm, ‘The elephant shit was new on the scene. You’ve got to be new or you don’t stand a chance when it comes to the Turner. It’s blue tac one year, elephant shit the next. Lights going on and off the following.’

‘Next year it going to be Ernie’s hat,’ Derek announced, as he paid Peter the landlord behind the bar for ‘another pint of your very best, I thank you’, together with a packet of the Walker’s Beef and Onion for his own consumption, and a packet of the Walker’s Smokey Bacon for his dog.

‘Someone ought to put Ernie’s ’at in for the Turner,’ Muriel called over, ‘There’s money in that ’at in the Turner,’ she insisted.

‘My hat is staying where it is,’ Ernie assured her.

‘You can put both hat and Ernie himself in,’ Derek proposed, ‘That’ll do the trick. That’ll win the first prize, that’s for sure.’

‘You leave me and my hat out of it,’ Ernie protested.

‘The point is,’ Harry says, attempting in his way to clarify the situation, ‘from what Jack here tells us, it’s a hard world, the world of the conceptual artist. It’s cut-throat.’

‘It’s every man and woman for him and herself. That’s what I understand of it,’ Jack declares to one and all.

‘This Anthony, him working with tin cans, bits of stick, he comes in the Queen’s Arms those days from time to time,’ Jack divulged to young Morris and Julia, ‘He was a Guinness man. Monica, she was vodka and orange.

‘As we say, it was a tragedy what happened there,’ Harry re-asserted.

‘That’s it, Harry. Eh? Tragic,’ Jack concurred, ‘They were getting on like a house on fire, and then, out of the blue, he ditched her. He says: “No more. Thanks for the memories. Off you go. Shut the door behind you.”

‘He gives her the push,’ Harry said.

‘That’s it, Harry,’ Jack confirmed, ‘According to George’s Charmain, Monica was devastated. Charmain, she used to come in the Queen’s Arms with her George. You remember, Derek. She and George used to sit over on the upholstered seating where you’re sitting now, Morris, Julia. Charmain there in her low-cut crimson dress, her big handbag down at the side of her, him in his light grey suit, the green striped tie, him with his London Evening Standard. Monica and Charmain, they were both of them working for the Halifax, as it was then. Monica, she says to Charmain, Anthony’s ditched her because she was fat. “I’m fat and bad tempered and possessive,” she says to her. “No, you’re not,” says Charmain, “You’re lovely,” she tells her. “Anthony giving you up – he’s a fool,” she says.’

‘It doesn’t do any good, does it, Jack?’ Harry observed.

‘No, it doesn’t do any good at all, Harry. Monica reckons her Anthony gives her her cards on account of her appearance, on account of her being, in her mind’s eye, a large woman. She turns against herself, that’s what Charmain tell us. She comes in here one evening, doesn’t she, Harry? Her hair, what used to be fair and down to her shoulders, she has it cut short. It was no more than a quarter of an inch in length.’

‘She dyed it black,’ Harry remembered. ‘It didn’t look natural, did it, Jack? We say, “Hello, you making some changes here, aren’t you, Monica?” She says, “What’s that to do with you?” she says. Very snappy she was.’

‘That’s it, Harry. Charmain, she tells us – this was later, when it all comes to light – she tells us Monica, she gives up her job at the Halifax. She takes on a part-time job with a firm of builders not far from where she lives. She goes on a diet. She gets down from ten and a half stone to eight, so Charmain tell us.’

‘Jack sees her one day outside Marks and Spencers. She was as thin as a rake, wasn’t she?’

‘She was, Harry,’ Jack avowed, ‘At a glance, from experience, one would say she was no longer the comely young woman she was. She was no longer chest 40, regular arm, waist 36 – halve it, 18 – inside leg 30.’

‘She was no longer chest 40, regular arm, waist 36 – halve it, 18 – inside leg 30,’ Harry reiterated.

‘Out there,’ Jack continued, ‘outside Marks and Spencers, in the brief moment I see her, I’d say she was chest 28, regular arm, waist 16-’

‘Halve it,’ Harry interjects.

‘8,’ says Jack.

‘Waist 8,’ Harry avouched, him intending to emphasise the seriousness of Monica’s physical deterioration.

‘Her inside leg 30,’ Jack concluded.

‘28, regular, 16 – halve it: 8 – 30,’ Harry summarised, ‘That wasn’t a happy state of affairs,’ he postulated, ‘not at all. Her arms were the same length. Likewise her height. Head to toe, no alteration there. But, as Jack says, the chest, the waist, they were significantly diminished. And it doesn’t end there, does it, Jack?’

‘No, it doesn’t,’ Jack agreed, ‘According to Charmain, Monica, she goes on dieting more and more, doesn’t she? Her periods stop, so Charmain tells us. No matter. She sticks to what she wants to do. It’s all or nothing with Monica. She’s not the woman what she was, before Anthony the conceptual artiste, him with his tin cans, and bits of stick, walks out on her. She gets herself down to seven stone. There was nothing to her. She was a twig,’ Jack disclosed.

‘She was a bean pole,’ Harry attested. ‘She was a stick insect.’

‘She goes out and buys herself a ‘little black number’, a tight-fitting black jacket and a narrow ankle-length black skirt,’ Jack told young Julia and

Morris, who, it was observed, had become increasingly attentive to their story. 'She 'phoned the builders where she'd been working since she left the Halifax and tells them she can't come in no more. As we remember Charmain telling us, Monica goes to the doctor, asks him for a sick note.

He tells her that she's underweight, whereupon, she goes home to her flat, locks the front door and thereafter declines to answer the 'phone, eh?'

'She sits on a chair in her living-room,' Harry says, taking up the story, 'she reduces her diet to a cup of tea and a dried biscuit a day. As Charmain tells us, she was in fear of obesity.'

'Monica,' Jack says, 'she takes "her little black number" – the jacket and skirt. She takes it in, see – the chest and waist, the hips and that. She stands before the mirror in her bedroom – this is what Harry and me reckon - she wasn't seeing herself as what anyone else in their right mind would rightly see her - she was seeing herself as obese.'

'She thinks,' Harry surmises, "God help us, look at those hips, look at those thighs." '

'She were overwhelmed by the enormity of her bones,' Ernie calls over.

'She was consumed with intent,' stated psychiatrist Dr James.

'The long and the short of it was,' Jack continued, 'Charmain called on Anthony for Monica's mother's phone number. Monica's divorced mother lived in Malta. Anthony, without a word, he puts aside his tin cans, bits of stick and found the number on a board by the kitchen door.'

Charmian 'phones Monica's mother. Her mother 'phones Monica, but she gets no answer. She writes to Monica to tell her she's coming over. She takes a taxi from the airport to Monica's flat.'

'She rings the bell. No answer.' Harry recounted.

'She bangs on the door – nothing,' Jack continued, he aware as he was of the increasing dramatic tension of the narrative, of his own skill in telling it, and the effect of this upon his audience.

'She and Charmain go to the police,' he told them, 'The police break down the door. They find her, slumped in an armchair, an untouched cup of tea and a plain tea biscuit on the table at her side.'

'She was dead,' Harry proclaimed.

'It was tragic, no other word for it,' Jack observed.

'How awful,' Morris down from Leeds said.

'Awful,' his lady companion young Julia agreed.

'Her little black number, the little black jacket, the black skirt, what she was wearing when they find her, it engulfs her,' Jack reported.

'It swamps her,' Harry remarked.

The story, although not yet over, had arrived at the point where, in a show of appreciation, Derek, as was expected of him, offered to replenish Jack and Harry's glasses, whereupon the young Morris with the encouragement of his Julia got to his feet and insisted he be allowed to

pay for Jack and Harry's drinks, and then, after a moments hesitation, offered to stand a round for everyone present, an offer which was accepted with thanks and engineered surprise. The glasses refilled and paid for by Morris, and with everyone settled back in their places, Jack and Harry took up the story from where they had left off.

'They have Monica's funeral wake at Charmain's, in her flat in Shepherd's Bush. Don't they, Harry?' Jack announced, 'He was there – Anthony. He didn't stay long. Harry and me, we were there. Muriel was there, weren't you, Muriel?'

'I were there,' Muriel proudly asserted.

'Muriel, she'd not miss a funeral wake, eh, Muriel?' Ernie said.

'You mind your own business,' Muriel retorted.

'Charmain's George, he was there,' Jack recalled, 'Poor old George, he was there. Everyone, Monica's young friends, speak of her as how, before she became ill, she was such a lively soul. They keep on saying she was so lively. Some of them there at the wake, they blame Anthony for what happened to her, to Monica. They're saying how in effect he broke her heart. There was this woman at the wake who was very forthright about the whole business. She says how Monica's illness, as she speaks of it, was brought on as a consequence of the culture of male

domination within society. She says Monica's death was a protest, wasn't it? - an expression of defiance, a call to all women to take up arms.'

'I didn't care for her over much,' Harry recollected, 'She kept looking at me, funny like,' he said, 'Like she had plans for me. Plans what frankly I'd rather not be included in. I didn't like her. I could have done without her there,' he insisted. 'Monica's mother, she says to me as how she couldn't believe her daughter could have done what she did,' Harry testified, 'All those years, Monica growing up, her mother was proud of her. Later on that afternoon I overhear her say to Anthony before he leaves as how she thought Monica and him were getting on so well together.'

'There was another woman there,' Jack recalled, 'not the woman that looks at Harry like she had plans - but another one who could have been a friend of hers. She says she blames Monica's psychological deterioration on the media and fashion industry. This gives rise, doesn't it, Harry, as we remember, to a discussion about Monica and her demise as related to the burgeoning billion dollar diet industry. Then, if I recall rightly, someone else starts on about the decline of religious education in our schools. And the loss of social coherence and the sense of community and that.'

'It was all very high-powered it was, Jack,' says Harry.

‘It was sometime after the funeral – some weeks, as I recall,’ Jack related, ‘that Harry and I, we hear as how Charmain and Monica’s Anthony have taken up with each other. They’d become what is known today as an item. Charmain told Harry and me as how, she now being, as she referred to herself, Anthony’s bitch, it was possible, if not more than likely, she’d become immortalized.’

‘A celebrity in her own right,’ Harry clarified.

‘That’s it, Harry. Just so. She says to Harry and me, Anthony, him doing all right, it was on the cards that in time he’d become famous. Like Picasso. Or Andy Warhol.’

‘Or the fella with the blue tac, Jack,’ Harry interpolated.

‘That’s it, Harry. Charmain, in the course of time, may find herself hung in the Tate Gallery, she says to us. Anthony, as we understand it, he asked Monica’s mother before she sailed back to Malta if he can have Monica’s ‘little black number’ – the little black jacket and skirt that she died in. Her mother, she sees no reason why he can’t have it. He takes the outfit back to his studio - this was according to Charmain - he takes the outfit – rough estimate: chest 23, regular arm, waist 14 – halve it, 7 - inside leg 28 – he cuts away the lapels, the sleeves, the cuffs, the length of material from the collar to the waist. He cuts up the skirt. He arranges the pieces separately, then he glues them with his tin cans and his bits of stick to the hardboard backing. Not as they have been, but different, in a

new way. A lapel here, a sleeve there, tin cans, bits of stick here and thereabouts. It was a montage.'

'He has it exhibited in a gallery south of the river,' Harry informed the young people.

'He calls it "Sunrise Over Shepherd's Bush Green",' Jack announced.

And so it was that - Morris having bought another round for all present, with Peter the landlord about to call last orders, and the song 'When you're smiling, when you're smiling, the whole world smiles with you' coming down from Tina and her stereo upstairs - Derek leans into Harry and Jack.

'That bit at the end, about the bits of her outfit and the tin cans and that glued together - "Sunrise Over Shepherd's Bush Green" - that was new,' he, out of the hearing of the young visitors, said.

'Yes, well,' Jack confided, 'one likes to vary it a bit - keep it fresh.'

**Words 3224**

**END**