

The Shouter

By Tom Hollingsworth

He kept shouting. A bus driver shook his head and tutted while his passengers dutifully looked into the shop windows, avoiding the twitching figure noisily striding up and down the pavement. His arms flailed. The sunshine made me squint and I crossed the road a good fifty yards in front of him, avoiding catching his eyes. A small police car drifted to a stop, and a burly young PC got out, comically drawing himself up to his full height. The car toy like against his size. Silence fell. I stopped and watched as the noisy man hung his head and after listening intently to the young policeman he suddenly strode off as if he had received urgent news, a galvanised ragged figure proclaiming his otherness, lost in the neat surroundings. The few distant spectators lounged back in their chairs outside the coffee shop, `nothing to see` one mouthed through the window to a ghost shadow in the dark interior.

The weather was on the turn and it had been getting warmer, so I had taken to reading my evening paper sitting in the sunny bay window of my flat. From my third floor eyrie I could lean out and clearly see the top of my street as it joined the busier high road that ran along its narrow mouth. Often I would hear the sounds of thumping car stereos below in the street as cars and taxis dropped off and picked up my neighbours and their neighbours too. City life. I sipped my tea and murmured appreciatively. Just like my first cup of tea in the

morning or crossing out important dates on the calendar pinned to the kitchen notice board, my evening tea and paper ritual never changed.

Five thirty, tea and the Evening Standard. For me these simple regular habits were like the tent poles of my life. Habits, rituals they govern our every waking moment. Without mine I always felt vaguely incomplete, somehow cheated of my basic comforts and to put it plainly, thrown off whack. I must admit that thinking about it some of my habits are pretty rigid. Out the station at five, pick up spare milk if needed, swing by my newsagent and get the Evening Standard. Keys and home. Jacket off, case down, shoes off, kettle on, TV on, check answer machine, make tea, sit down, read paper. But that was me. A creature of habit or ritual if you will. A regular person.

A place for everything, and everything in its place.

That Monday was no different. The sun had begun to lose its heat, but the breeze was still pleasant and I suddenly noted with pleasure that I had made a really good cup of tea. Better than oh at least the last ten or so. Then the shouting began. It was constant and loud echoing between the houses and as I craned my head round the gently moving curtain I saw him, head thrown back, arms beginning their frenzied flailing. The shouter.

I don't remember quite when it was that I started to refer to him as such, I think it was to my newsagent once, when I was buying my evening paper. The poor man turned up regular as clockwork and ranted his way down our high

street every day for it seemed like the past six months. But from then on my nickname for him passed into my common parlance. I would find myself mentioning him in conversation. Friends would ask if I had heard him lately, often at work I would compare errant colleagues to him and once as a joke I told a story about him. I'd gone to Oxford Street, shoes I think, and there he was, the shouter, stiffly frozen outside a fast food restaurant, angry voice raised and his straining neck muscles reflected in the plate glass. When I got back to my office I told my colleagues of my surprise at seeing him away from his usual spot outside my local bank.

I went on to venture what I thought was an amusing theory that perhaps the man who normally went mad there was off sick, and that loony central control had got in the shouter as a temporary replacement. We all laughed together and as I went back into my own office I felt a sudden sense of guilt. O.K. Make a joke, fine, but to get a laugh at the expense of the shouters tortured mind. Shame ran through me and chastened I picked up my ringing phone and guiltily pushed him from my thoughts.

I sipped my tea as his voice rang through the cool evening air. He kept on. I put my paper down and listened. It wasn't as if you could clearly make out distinguishable phrases or sentences, it was short and fierce, the odd swear word puncturing the flow. You couldn't see him from where I sat, he was just out of sight round the corner, probably pacing back and forth along his usual regular tiny route. He would pace up and down the length of about five shops

agitatedly walking between the bank and the newsagents. His voice rose in pitch and then in volume and then abruptly snapped off as if a switch had been flicked. I looked out and he shuffled into view, his other walk, a strange cat like movement that silently took him beyond my line of sight, the peace a blessed relief. Back to the film reviews and then dinner. Order. Things back in place.

It was about a week later when it happened. I'd taken a break from work and visited a friend in Watford where in a fit of indulgence I'd spent far too much on a leather jacket. It just seemed the thing to do. I'm self employed, a sort of consultant. Music and Media mainly. It gives me the flexibility to work my own hours but sometimes like all one-man band businesses I overstretch myself. In fact a few years back I basically worked myself into collapsing from exhaustion so now I am all too aware of the danger signs. Stress can creep up on you all too easily. So my indulgent day out of lunch and shopping was a signal to myself to take it easy.

When I got back late that afternoon, the phone didn't stop, but my short break had done me the power of good and I felt fine, lots of energy, plus the plans for a very unusual new project which really appealed to me. I poured another cup of tea and to my annoyance I realised I had run out of milk. The dribble in the bottom of the carton was never going to be enough for that evenings guests and me, so I decided to nip out on a quick shopping expedition. Tugging on my jacket I suddenly felt energetic and leaping down the stairs

two at a time, I fell into the street, barely pausing to adjust my sunglasses and catch my breath.

The shop I use is at the top of the road, about a hundred yards past the pub. There is a nearer shop but for no discernible reason they seem to add about twenty pence to every item you buy. Apparently it's the price you have to pay for them being so near. For the saving I walk. It's only twenty pence but it's probably that feeling of being ripped off, more than the saving if I'm honest.

As I reached the top of the road the shouter started and I automatically crossed over, avoiding his regular little patch up from the bank, a thing I always did. He made me feel uncomfortable. He wasn't like the little bundles of sleeping bags and dogs on the Embankment. Passive and pitiable, easily assuaged with a handful of change. He almost demanded attention. Often I would glance toward him as I crossed further down the street but he seemed to look toward me so I would feign interest in a shop window and hurry by. I don't know what it was. The venom in his shouting. His lunging hands as he fought with imaginary foes. Whatever reason I avoided him, it seemed politic, he lived in his world of shadows and I in mine of light and there was no link, no common ground, no connection.

The sun was still bright and I felt comfortably anonymous behind my dark glasses and furtively I watched him as almost in parallel we both made our way along the road.

He always wore a grubby white two piece suit, only just grubby though and I had often wondered where he came from each day. It seemed logical that it was a home or day-care centre because from time to time he would appear with a haircut and a trimmed beard, his sun darkened skin scrubbed, his suit semi pressed. The rest of the time he appeared unwashed, a greasy mat of tousled hair, his beard unkempt and wild.

His exact age was a mystery, he could have been thirty or a thousand, he seemed almost ageless but the main thing about him that always struck me was his eyes.

They were a piercing brown colour and even through my dark glasses they caught the light as he mirrored my journey down the street. Thrown into sharp relief by his tanned dirt smeared skin and dark beard, they almost shone as if lit from within as he wildly stared in confusion at things invisible to me.

Almost on cue the police car pulled up and shaking his head a burly sergeant trotted after him catching up as the shouter wheeled gracefully round on his set path. Quiet words were exchanged and the shouter snapped into his usual sudden urgent stride, disappearing down the road in silence, leaving the sergeant to grin at the dry cleaner who leaned in his shop doorway. I bought my milk as well as a packet of marshmallow teacakes, the sweet smell of which reminds me of my late mother for some strange reason.

Pausing only to skirt a Range Rover as it precariously tried to squeeze into a very small parking space I carefully twisted my carrier bag shut and crossed the road.

I hadn't gone more than ten yards or so when a sudden shriek made me turn round and there by the library stood the shouter, head bowed, his way barred by a large woman. She stood in front of him calling out to the street in general, making some point about him being no better than an animal. Her companion, another large woman stood beside her nodding vigorous approval as an untidy knot of small children clung onto her skirt.

One of the women lunged at him and I clearly heard her hand connect with his face, a muted sort of slap, and his head rocked back, as her face a flushed red circle bobbed near his grime smeared white chest. He stood immobile while they tugged at him and I walked toward them aware as I did so of others moving alongside me.

"What'd he do " ventured a fat young man in a tight leather jacket " Didn't touch the kids did he " he stood theatrically, a fist outstretched, looking around him for approval. " I'll have you son " he spat at the shouter who looked to all the world as if he was pinned to a post, his body slumped, his skinny frame seeming to sway scarecrow like on an invisible breeze.

The red faced woman folded her large arms contemptuously " He looked at me " she breathed in sharply " We was walking by him and he looked right down my dress " she moved her head catching eyes but her sense of outrage

was lost on us. The fat boy looked disappointed and shrugged. She looked at me imploringly. “ Well how would you feel “ and I heard myself trying to sound reasonable, saying calming things but as I finished the shouter slowly lifted his head up and our eyes suddenly locked.

My breath caught in my chest and I remembered the only other time I had ever looked into eyes like that before. I clutched my milk and fell back twenty years.

It was during my childhood. Scouts, ten years old, twelve, fourteen, endless camping trips, sunny, foggy, raining. Sundays always meant a visit to the nearest church to fight the good fight. We were Christian we were told, but I didn't feel any different for it. The churches we visited always smelt of damp to me, a musty woody old empty dead smell, and there was always a great big brass eagle lectern that the vicar read his great bible from. As he spoke I would try to feign concentration while staring up at the long stained glass windows, trying to catch a glimpse of the daylight outside through the only splash of colour in those dead empty places. Great weal's and slashes of bright colour, bearing images of drama and dread.

The pale man on the cross always fascinated me. Shimmering crimson red drops hung from his hands and feet like sparkling rubies on a silk sheet and his eyes were always raised to the sky, great pools of brown, aching,

desperate, alone. Eyes that knew the pain of the world. The eyes of the Shouter. Dying for my sins. A doubter. Lost to paradise.

She slapped him again and his gaze wrenched from mine as his head jerked back and swiftly pushing past the fat boy, the police sergeant stepped between them his voice angry now. "Okay that's quite enough of that. Nothing to see here, everyone just move along now. Off you go the lot of you " and tutting loudly he put a meaty hand on the Shouters shoulder and tugged him closer " Now what did I just tell you " his voice dropped to a gentle whisper and carefully he led the shouter over to a nearby bench. After a minute the Shouter broke into his familiar bustling walk away down the road towards the station followed by the Sergeant. I crossed over to avoid him.

I left him there. He was being taken care of. What could I do? So I went home. But the picture from my childhood was fixed in my head. Imagine. To be trapped on that cold window, eternally locked into that single dreadful moment, deserted and waiting for a merciful release. Helpless and calling into the silence, unsure of the final destination. Trapped in a world between worlds. His lips wracked with pain as he tries to form the words help me. Imagine to be so lost and alone.? With no-one to see your pain.

I can hear him calling out now but to my shame I always cross over.