

HOME

Geoff Ryman

There was another one of them this morning, by Waterloo Station. He was a young lad. About a month ago, he had asked me for money. He said it was to feed his dog. He kept the animal inside his jacket and it poked its head out. I remember thinking it looked too gentle a creature to live out on the street. The dog leaned out and tried to lick my hand.

"I'm sorry," I told him. "I only have 20 pence."

He had some sort of regional accent, rather pleasant actually. "Ach, I cannot take a man's last 20 pee.

"Tough time, Grumps?" Gertrude bellows. It's like trying to hold a conversation in the middle of a rugby pitch.

"You'll get marks on my sofa," I tell her.

"Not marks. Bloodstains," said Brunnhilde going all bug-eyed like a horror movie. Something else they don't have these days. Both girls are huge, vast, like something out of the first issue of Superman, you know, lifting vehicles single-handed. I, in the meantime, am getting into a wrestling match with my coat and scarf. My coat and scarf are winning. Even my clothing is insolent these days.

"Here, let me do it for you," says Gertrude and takes them from me. "Wossa ma-ah, Grumps?" Her speech is interrupted by more glottal stops than a Morris Minor in need of a service.

"I saw another one of those bodies," I said.

"You weren't down Wa'ahloo, again, were you?" she said.

"It's where I get my coffee from," I said. "Or rather, used to."

"Coffee," says Brunnhilde and makes a moue of disgust the size of a bagel.

"I'd rather drink paint stripper."

"Wa'ahloo is where all the dossers hang out, Grumps. Issa bloody wossa butcher shop. "

Brunnhilde is rubbing her thighs in a way that I take to be sarcastic. "Maybe he likes a bit of excitement."

Gertrude giggles at the idea, and smooths down my coat. For her, it lies still. I tell you the thing is alive and has it in for me. "Look, Grumps. Do yourself a favor. Stay north of the river. You don't know where the safe passages are."

"I refuse to accept that there are parts of this city where I must not walk."

"You don't go for a stroll down the middle of the motorway, do you? Come on, sit down."

I do as I'm told, but I'm still upset. My hands are shaking. They are also lumpy and blue and cold. "Why do they do it?" I say.

"Why do we do it, you mean," says Gertrude, plumping up a pillow.

"You do it?"

"Well, yeah. We all do it, Grumps. It's game. There's too many of them on the streets. If you know what you're doing, you don't get hurt. You know. You're out with your mates, you're in a gang, you see another gang. You leave each other alone."

"And go for the defenseless. Well that is brave of you!"

Brunnhilde explains the rationale for me. "They're killing themselves with all that booze and fags." I remembered the yellow tips of that boy's fingers.

"Then let them do it in peace, you don't have to help them."

Oh dear. I'm shocked again. I can't accept that nice young people on a date will kill someone as part of the evening's entertainment. In my day, you felt racy if you fell down in the gutter. Stoned was lying on your back upside down and realizing you were trying to crawl across the sky.

"They're just using up resources," says Brunnhilde, and she stands up, and starts to case the joint. Her upper lip is working as her tongue runs back and forth over her teeth. It looks as though she has a mouthful of weasels. "You

live here all alone, then?" she asks.

"I was married," I say.

"Nice place. Aren't you a bit scared living here all alone? With all this stuff?" She is fingering my Yemeni dagger. A souvenir of a very different time and place.

"Some of it must be worth a packet. Don't you feel unprotected?"

"Yes," I say. "All the time."

"Yeah. You could be here all alone and someone come in." She's taken the dagger out of its decorated sheath. It's curved and it gleams. It's not very sharp. It would hurt.

"In the end, it's all just things," I say.

"Oh, can I have some of them, then?" she asks, and giggles. I'm rather pleased to report that I was not frightened, simply aware of what was going on.

"Look at the poor old geezer," said Brunnhilde. "Using up space. Using up food." She looked at Gertrude. "Let's put him out of his misery."

"Honestly, Brum, you're such a wanker!" Gertrude said, and threw a pillow at her. "I mean, your idea of sport is to pitch into my old Grumps? Well, you do like a pulse-pounder, don't you?"

Brunnhilde looked downcast, as though she had failed to be elected Head Girl. Gertrude was on her feet. "Come on, let's get you out before Grumps does you some collateral. Honestly. You can be so naff sometimes."

"All right then!" said Brunnhilde, biting back rather ineffectively. "Social work is not my forte anyway." She took a final slurp of my fruit juice. As she held the glass, she curled her little finger delicately away from it. Then Gertrude bundled her towards the door.

"See you later, Grumps. I'll take this wild woman off your hands."

"I wasn't frightened, you know." I said. I wanted her to know that.

"Course not. You're the hard type that goes to Waterloo." They both laughed, and the door closed. I heard Gertrude say outside. "S'all right. I'll get it all when he dies anyway."

I'm reasonably certain that Gertrude saved my life, but I don't think she thought that was very important. She did it rather as one might stop someone putting his greasy head on the anti-macassars. I am so grateful for small favors.

But at least I understood what was happening

I miss Amy, of course. I sometimes wonder if things would be any different if we'd had children, grandchildren. They would have turned out like Gertrude, I expect. Strangers, complete strangers, no matter how often I talked to them. So. I bolted my door, and I went Home.

It is vaguely embarrassing. I expect I smiled to myself, slightly guilty, slightly ashamed, like those people gawking at corpses. Rigging myself up in all the gear, as though I were auditioning for a part in Terminator II Better than the muck they put on these days, it's all like old Shirley Temple movies to me. I slip on the spectacles and I put on the boots and the gloves, and then I'm off Home.

Village near Witney, Oxfordshire, 1954. Church bells. The elms have not all died of disease, so there are banks of them, huge, high, billowing Re clouds and squawking with rookeries. And all the Cotswold stone houses are lined up with thatched roofs and crooked windows in which sit Delft vases, and the Home Service is playing music so sensible it almost smells of toasted white bread. There used to be a country called England. I'm not the one who remembers this it, though I was there. My bones remember it.

And I knock on a door and say "Good morning, Mrs. Clavell, is Kimberly there, please?" and then out comes my friend Kim.

Same age as me. We've taken recently to looking as we actually are, old fools. Kim has some snow-white hair left and his cheeks are mapped with purple veins. But we're wearing shorts and we can climb trees. We can climb to the pinnacle of the old ruined abbey, and there is no one guarding it and no one charging

admission. No son et lumiere for Japanese tourists. And do you know? Hardly even a ritual killing. It's ours.

Kim moved to California, and became both rich and poor at the same time as is the way in California, always about to make a film. He's even worse off than I am now, in some home, without another friend in the world, in someone else's country. But he's Home now.

We take the shortcut, through the fields, past the hall. Here, the safe passages are ours, all the way to the river.