

Tim

by [Ernst Larkin](#) (March 2020)



Talking on the Street, Matsumoto Shunsuke, 1937

Rob, this is Tim. He's 23 and he's homeless" says Di, our front-desk volunteer, in a pinched tone which suggests compassion but has a slightly accusatory lilt which puts me on edge; it's not that she blames me for Tim's dearth of opportunity, but she clearly expects me—in my role of

administrator at a tiny community library in North London—to have some kind of solution for him at my fingertips and is disappointed by the lack of instantaneous implementation.

She needn't have bothered explaining Tim's situation to me, the reason I've left the relative haven of the office and walked to the front desk is to investigate the source of the nauseating odour that has started to permeate through the building, my typically razor-sharp powers of perception alight on Tim as the probable culprit.

"Gosh, it's warm and stuffy today" I say as I open every window in the vicinity (it is unseasonably cold), "you don't mind me opening a window do you, Di?"

I get no response from her beyond an increasingly agitated and disapproving stare, whilst Tim discourses in a muddled but sincerely passionate way on the price difference between a curried chicken pastry between the Walmart down the road and the one in Bradford where he's from. In the end he reasons sagely that it doesn't really matter what they charge because, "I just nick 'em". There follows a rather long-winded and incomprehensible explanation of his personal technique, the detail of which I won't go into, suffice to say it involves taking the pastry out of its packaging and stuffing it down his trousers.

Peering into his face, my heart feels a twinge of empathy; he is 23 but looks at least twice that, he is visibly malnourished, missing several teeth, and has a pallid but weather-beaten countenance. He doesn't smell of drink, but he seems to have difficulty standing still and paces about reception swaying slightly. Indeed, the only clue to his actual age is the remarkably youthful glow of his eyes. My empathy is extinguished however at the sight of the pathetic but nevertheless malevolent sneer that seems permanently affixed to his face, suggesting his belief that he's constantly pulling one over on the world. I suppose this

delusion must make the stark opposite of his reality easier to cope with, but I find it unpleasant regardless.

Di is still waiting for my earth-shattering pronouncement and is now actually tapping her foot with impatience so I mumble something about the Salvation Army down the road. The words have the same effect on the room as if I had just killed and eviscerated a cat in front of them; Tim's sneer somehow becomes even more pronounced, and Di looks at me with abject horror and disgust. I've forgotten that Di is one of those militant atheists who is paradoxically terrified of any mention of the God in whom they do not believe (I always wonder what people like that are so frightened of). What I have done however, is give Di the excuse to clamber onto her officious high-horse, which is what I expect the whole charade was really about. It's now her turn to ramble on interminably and I decide to make a start back to the office, I'm not really listening but occasionally words like "Connection" and "Shelter" cut through the vague morass of drivel.

Back at my desk I have to make a real effort of will to dam the rising flood of irritation and keep it from spilling over and out through my mouth as I wonder how she can have the nerve to badger this chap in her bland but infuriatingly didactic tone. Di is a single mother of two who has no job but enjoys a steady income from the state and her ex-husband. She volunteers at our library for an hour and a half once a week (except for when she emails at the last minute to say she's "run out of time"), and I struggle to think how she fills the other 166. She hates cooking and rarely does any cleaning unless it's absolutely necessary as, "it's only going to get dirty again". Projects like putting up a flat-pack shelf which should take an afternoon somehow go on for weeks and I get weekly updates on her progress. I think the happiest time of her life was the day she was diagnosed with a mild case of anaemia as it allows her arbitrarily to exempt herself on medical grounds from anything she doesn't want to do—most

things as it happens, except sitting down and pontificating. I wonder how much her life really differs from Tim's and settle on the fact that Tim probably costs the taxpayer less. What is the price of a few pilfered curried chicken bakes as compared to the maintenance of a two-bedroom flat and its three feckless tenants?

The phrase "narcissism of small differences" appears in my mind as I wander back through to the front desk. It's been 20 minutes and Di is still talking at Tim, barely pausing for breath (despite the anaemia) and the empathetic twinge in my heart reignites. His sneer is markedly less pronounced now and his youthful eyes keep darting longingly to the front door. After a while he can contain his agitation no longer and blurts out "well thanks love, but I've really got to be on my way".

I can't help but chuckle slightly. The one luxury that Tim has more of than anybody else in the world is time; he doesn't have to be anywhere, has no deadlines, and presumably experiences time's passage in the same non-linear way as the hunter-gatherer tribal bands of yore. Nevertheless, 20 minutes of Di's relentless nonsense is enough firmly to establish in him an acute chronophobia. I ruminate on the idea of trading places with him and for a second wonder which one of us is really worse-off before it dawns on me that he's managed to escape.

"I'll go and put the kettle on" I say, before Di has the chance to start up again.

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