

Gypsy Gab

By Theodore Dalrymple

Often on Saturdays, outside a small supermarket in the town in which I live in England, stands a swarthy woman in her 30s who wears a black scarf around her head. She is not Muslim but Moldavian, probably of gypsy background. She tries to sell a publication called *The Big Issue* to rather reluctant passersby



and has an insinuating and obsequiously whining manner that is no doubt intended to arouse pity but—in me, at any rate—arouses only deep irritation and dislike.

The Big Issue was founded in 1991. The idea was for homeless people to sell the magazine on the streets, at a profit to themselves, and thereby take the first step to a better way of life. The vendors had, like drug dealers, a certain “patch” in which they, and they alone, were licensed by the publisher to sell the magazine. The vendors were enjoined to be polite and respectful, and not to turn aggressive when people refused to buy the magazine.

I have bought it intermittently, not because I wanted to read it, but to do a good turn to the vendors. On the whole, they are polite, as they are enjoined to be, though one has the slight suspicion that in other circumstances they might not be quite so polite, indeed quite the reverse. Once I was involved as a witness in a case of murder in which one seller of *The*

Big Issue murdered another in a dispute over the border of their respective patches and left his body in a multistory car park, where it remained for a surprising length of time before discovery. As in the great majority of cases of non-domestic murder these days, video evidence played a large part in the culprit's conviction. You—we—are being watched.

This sordid murder somewhat reduced my approval of the business model of the magazine. But even if this were the case, the obligation to be polite is potentially of educational value to sellers: Practice makes not only perfect, but habitual.

The content of *The Big Issue* tends to irritate me, with its flavor of leftist self-righteousness. But it is possible to sympathize with underdogs without belief in their moral superiority or their special insight into economics and other realities. And one should read what one is unlikely to agree with, besides which I bought the publication more as a favor to those who sell it than because I need reading matter.

I spoke to the Moldavian woman outside the supermarket in the few words of Romanian that I possess. Her manner immediately changed, and she ceased her tone of a severely constipated person trying to expel hardened feces. She smiled, revealing the usual steel dentistry.

She asked me whether I had ever been to Romania, and I said that I had. Moreover, perhaps more unusually, I had been (once) to Moldavia.

It was just after the breakup of the Soviet Union. I belonged by co-option to a little busybodying group that monitored the fairness or otherwise of elections in post-Soviet states. I didn't really like such busybodying, with its inevitable connotation of moral superiority by reason of nationality and national tradition; but I went along for the ride. I inspected prisons and hospitals, both normal and psychiatric, and found

the usual defects of apathy tempered by cruelty, incompetence, and lack of resources.

Moldova had been of the nominally autonomous republics of the Soviet Union, and the Soviets had tried to maintain that the Moldovans were not really Romanians, and that the language that they spoke was very different from Romanian. In general, Westerners went along with this shameful fiction; but of course, the history of Moldova in any case was not such as would rejoice the heart of those who believe in the goodness of mankind.

I cannot now remember whether the elections in Moldova were free and fair, but I do remember from my time busybodying about such matters in various formerly Soviet republics that official Western election observers tended to find elections free and fair if their favored candidate won, but unfree and unfair if he didn't.

But to return to the Moldovan lady in front of the supermarket. I sympathized with her as an individual, as a person; I doubted that her life had been or was an easy one, certainly by comparison with mine. I bought the magazine she was selling and even allowed her to keep the change.

Nevertheless, I could not entirely suppress my irritation that she was present in the country. What possible benefit did she bring to it? How had she arrived? She could hardly have thought of herself, as a gypsy in Moldova, as persecuted to the point of being in danger of her life. And if she did think so, it was unlikely that England would have been the first safe country that she reached. She was in the country by preference, not by necessity or for reasons of safety.

Into the bargain, she was now pregnant. Did she arrive pregnant, or did she become pregnant in England? Who was the father? The mere fact of having a child born in England would give her, de facto, the right of residence. My guess is that

the child would be for years a charge on the public purse, as she herself would most likely be. Any money that she made by selling *The Big Issue* would—unless she were under the thumb of some extortioner—be extra, pocket money as it were (but nevertheless, made by honest effort).

Sympathy for individuals is not a good guide to policy. Among other things, bad policy might result in more people to be sympathized with. In effect, the presence of such as the Moldovan woman was imposing forced labor on the population, if taxation be regarded as a form of unfree labor.

We have to treat a line between being naively welcoming to masses, to the great detriment of cities and countries, and hard-hearted to individuals.

On the day I bought *The Big Issue* from the Moldovan woman, I happened quite by chance on a poem, published in 1911, by Wilfrid Gibson, once a highly regarded poet but now forgotten. He looks at the geraniums on his bedside that he had bought earlier that day from a very poor flower-seller. She had said to him:

*"I've sold no bunch today, nor touched a bite...
Son, buy six-pennorth; and 't will mean a bed."*

More than a century later, when poverty of such depth no longer exists, beggars still ask for money to secure them a bed for a night in a hostel.

But Gibson is not sentimental about his flower-seller. Though she is pitiable (in the sense of being worthy of compassion), Gibson does not claim that she is morally immaculate. In fact, she has been a drunken slattern; she has been "Broken with lust and drink."

The geraniums that he has bought from her will be dead, and possibly so will she:

*And yet to-morrow will these blossoms be dead
With all their lively beauty; and to-morrow
May end the light lusts and the heavy sorrow
Of that old body with the nodding head.
The last oath muttered, the last pint drained deep,
She'll sink, as Cleopatra sank, to sleep;
Nor need to barter blossoms for a bed.*

Realism and hard-heartedness—which often go together—are not quite the same thing.

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