

Tea and Stoicism

When two Englishmen meet, said Doctor Johnson, their first talk is of the weather. This may have been so in his day, but I suspect that these days they are more likely to talk of the Premier League, a much less stimulating and interesting subject. As for Englishwomen, I suspect their first talk is of pills, at least if my observation of them in buses and tea-rooms is anything to go by.

The other day, for example, I happened to be in some tea rooms on the Welsh border, overhearing (or rather listening to) four ladies at the table next to mine. One of them was holding forth on the pills she had just been given by her doctor, whose prescription she had filled. The others were, or seemed to be, very interested in what she had to say, as if they were all connected by one vast state of illness. They were of an age when increasing illness is to be expected.

The lady took the product information leaflet from the box of pills and read the potential side effects. They were many and terrible. She could put on weight, her bones might become brittle and she might suffer fractures, she might bruise easily, she might develop cataracts, her blood pressure might rise, she might become insomniac she might become paranoid, depressed or manic, and her face might become round.

I concluded from this that the pills she was taking, or at least prescribed (not necessarily the same thing) were steroids, and that her illness was a serious one. At least, one hopes that steroids are not being handed out for trivial conditions.

In fact it soon emerged that her illness was serious. She spoke of how her hair had fallen out, how she had worn a wig, and how her hair had recently grown back, different from how it had been before, finer and straighter and a different colour. From this I gathered that she had had chemotherapy and that her illness was cancer.

What I found impressive about the four ladies was that the ill person among them made light of her illness and expressed no self-pity while her interlocutors expressed no unctuous commiseration, though clearly they were her friends and must have sympathised. They laughed at the long list of side-effects (much longer than I have given) which she patient recited like a prayer. They made light of it though, being intelligent, they well knew that it was serious. An admirable spirit all round!

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