

The Man in Black

He was the oldest Goth in Medway, known as the Man in Black. Men of that style don't age well, holding on to a skin which is better shed by their thirties; straggly, raven hair, jet-black shirt, jeans and long coat. He was sitting on the concrete banks of the canal, the added on bit of the River Medway at the back of the civic centre, just a short walk away from the views across the river to, as the signs said, "Historic Rochester, The City of Great Expectations".

Charles Dickens used to walk this way, from his Gads Hill home to Rochester, stopping in Strood for a pint at the Crispin and Crispianus. That was in the days before the ring road. I favour the short cut through the retail park and on across the Rochester Bridge to the Hard Times Cafe. The Crispin is no place for a single woman and I prefer a cappuccino to alcohol these days. So that was where I was headed when I saw him – the Man in Black.

I didn't know him well. I had met him on a Suicide Awareness course, when he was working with the homeless and I with the mentally ill. I think we had both cared too much, never quite managed that "Us and Them" distinction, and it seemed we had each become "one of them".

It's true he always had been indistinguishable from his clients in how he looked and how he dressed. We call it empathy, stepping into the other man's shoes, but it seemed that with each man he had raised back on the ladder to a better life, he had dropped a few rungs himself.

I remembered talking to him during the lunch break on the course. He told me how he'd been stabbed in the arm with a kitchen knife, trying to break up a fight at the hostel where he worked. He'd been on duty on his own, when another member of staff had phoned in sick. He shouldn't have been working alone, but it's like that, in our line of work: the management are more interested in the welfare of the clients than the staff.

He'd scratched at the scar on his forearm as we talked, and there were other scars, like those I'd seen on my clients' arms: skin sliced with a razor blade; blood-letting to release the tension.

I suggested that we should support each other more, those of us in the front line. Somehow it never happened. We were each bound by this thing called "client confidentiality", couldn't discuss the goings on of our organisations outside of work. So, although we saw each other around and about, we never spoke again after that day.

God knows I could have done with some support myself. My work got on top of me after one of my clients set fire to herself in a local park. They say that men's suicide attempts are more spectacular than women's: quick and dramatic and they often have an audience. Women choose to die more slowly and quietly from overdoses and the like. I think my client had been dying inside for a long time and wanted to speed up the process.

They say you shouldn't blame yourself; people make their own choices. It was the inquest that did for me; the clinical detail of height and weight, and injuries sustained. I walked out of the job the next day and never went back. My marriage broke down around the same time and I went from professional helper to single parent living on benefits in the space of a few months; like the Man in Black, I had become "one of them."

He looked the part more than I did. He had gone from slim to skinny since I last saw him and his hair was not as black as it had been. Dyeing your hair takes a lot out of your benefits, but it was something I couldn't give up. Poor as I was, a trip to Demaje Hair Studio, followed by a new outfit from the Shelter Shop could soon put me right.

I wondered what had happened to him. Last I heard he had lost his job due to some scandal - dealing drugs to his clients. I'm not one to listen to gossip but was curious to find out the truth. I had heard that his marriage had broken down too and that he was living in a hostel in Hardstown, behind the closed down ABC cinema. Hardstown! Dickens could not have invented it. It was the worst estate in The Medway Towns, the last resort for people who were down on their luck. The Man in Black had ended up like his former clients; he was homeless too. At least I had kept my house and the children. He looked like he had lost everything.

I had a love-hate relationship with the Medway. Sometimes it soothed me to walk that way, other times its choppy waters seemed to call out to me. I wondered if he was thinking that way. I wanted to tell him that the water wasn't deep enough there. That he stood more chance of banging his head on a shopping trolley or landing softly on a discarded sofa. And, if I was him I'd choose a prettier bit of the river. Only a short walk, then he could have a view of the castle as he went down.

He hadn't seen me, so I decided not to make myself known and carried on to the cafe. I was never one to cross over to the other side, but self-preservation had made me wary of getting involved. You can drown in other people's misery and there are some journeys you have to make alone. Mine was to the café.

My encounter with the Man in Black haunted me for weeks. I scanned the pages of The Medway News for reports of bloated bodies. Then I remembered that the best way to get something troubling out of your head is to write it down. I wrote a story about the Man in Black and entered it into a competition for the Medway Literature Festival. It won first prize. There was a presentation at The Dickens Centre and an extract of my story was printed in the local paper, with my photo next to it. I saw no harm in it, I hadn't used the Man in Black's name and it felt like something good had come of an unsettling incident. For me, it felt as if I had taken a step back up the ladder.

Then it was as if he was everywhere. I was walking round Strood Market one day when I saw him in the company of a couple of down and outs. It was half past ten in the morning and he was swigging from a can of lager. I felt uneasy, wondered if he'd seen the paper and recognised himself in the story. I tried to act like I was in a hurry as I passed him. I thought I heard him say, "Bitch".

On my way back from the shops, walking to the library, he was never far behind. I tried to avoid him. I began to feel I had betrayed him, used his misfortune for my own gain.

I looked out my window one afternoon to see him staggering outside the corner shop, drunk as a lord, ranting and waving his arms at my house. He knew where I lived, but what could he do to me? How could I take back my story or say I was sorry that I had survived hard times better than he had? Then he disappeared again for a while.

At a loose end, I made the familiar walk another day. I had known better days than this, when Sunday was a welcome day of rest before the working week. Sundays could be lonely now my girls were growing into young women. They had their own lives. It was not as if I missed being married. Unlike Miss Havisham, who mourned her never-happened marriage, I regretted that mine had happened at all. The single life suited me, but celibacy meant solitary walks instead of leisurely lie-ins on a Sunday morning.

Perhaps Rochester was not the best place to be the week before the Dickens Festival, when all the flags were out, but nothing was happening. Just a few locals milling around, those who couldn't afford to take themselves off for the day to enjoy the sunshine elsewhere.

A few characters from the Dickens Society were outside The Visitor Centre promoting the coming festivities. Magwitch accosted me with a leaflet and a blackened leer. A man who looked like Fagin was ranting at Nancy and Bill Sykes; he was a street drinker from the benches near the Taste of Two Cities Indian restaurant. The council liked to clear the streets of vagrants before the tourists arrived, and it seemed he didn't appreciate the change to his routine.

I looked across to the benches and there was the Man in Black. His hair was streaked with silver now and none too clean. His eyes were rolling like the barrels of a fruit machine. As he caught sight of me, his can of Stella froze in mid air and he struggled to get up. I pretended I hadn't seen him, and quickened my step, turning back towards home. He followed.

Panic rose. I felt sure he wouldn't follow me into a café so I slipped into The Workhouse Tea Rooms. He slunk past, glaring sideways into the window. Perhaps I was being paranoid. Why would he be following me?

I relaxed and ordered a Mrs Bumbles Cream Tea. Rationality returned as I poured the tea. It was imagination that had got me here and I had let it run away with me. I finished my drink, gathered up my bag and Dickens Festival leaflet and left.

Walking past Copperfields Antiques, I took a detour down Two Post Alley where the buildings seemed to topple in on one another. I glanced back to the lamppost at one end then towards the one at the other end. All was well. I decided to walk round the Castle Gardens to clear my head. The skateboarders were whizzing around as usual. Nothing was out of place. I settled on a bench and relaxed. Peering across the river, I caught sight of a dark figure on the opposite banks. One leg over the wall, then the other, he dropped like a black gull towards the water.

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