

It's not what you think (theme)

I live in one of those areas where, when people find out you live there; the first thing they say is "Why do you choose to live in a place like that?" Usually I simply brush the question to one side explaining that 'it's not that bad and once you're through the door you don't see the bad side of life in the area.'

That bad side, if I may call it that, is the more than abundant presence of drug dealers and their 'users' and the proliferation of prostitutes and, of course, their clients.

The dealers I have no time for, I would gladly despatch every last one of them to a penal colony somewhere and let them get on with it. I am fed up to the teeth by constantly being approached to see if I 'want anything' and even when you offer a polite but blunt 'no thanks', you then receive their stock list and sometimes even the price list.

The users generally tend to disappear once they have paid for and received their supply of whatever they want but there are occasions, usually during the late evening, you may come home to find somebody injection themselves at your back gate or, worse still, somebody laid out on the floor where they have fallen, not knowing whether they are alive or dead.

The prostitutes are a different issue altogether. Although we may all agree that we don't particularly like seeing them on our street corners, or in our front gardens, they always seem to quietly and often politely move on when they see somebody approaching. Even the girls that chance to approach you seem to be quite friendly and I can only remember two or three occasions in the past four years when things have become unpleasant. I work on the principle that I have no idea why a particular girl chooses to follow this profession or what circumstances have forced her into it and so who am I to judge, and as my mother would say, "politeness costs nothing".

However, there is one particular incident that I would like to relate to you now. I arrived home at about 10.30 pm, from where I cannot remember. I had parked around the back and I walked around to the front of the block of flats where I live. At night I always take the long way round because it is better lit and I can see quite clearly what is ahead of me. If I go the quick way I have to unlock and pass through a solid wooden gate and I have, on many occasions, bumped into one or other of the afore-mentioned people on the other side of the gate.

On this occasion, as I removed my keys from my pocket to unlock the main door to the block, I looked across towards the rear gate and saw somebody sitting down on the floor exactly where I would have passed if using that route. I could not see if the person was male or female as their head

was bowed and their chin was on their chest, as if they were asleep. What was obvious, was that they had made themselves comfortable and had not simply laid where they had fallen.

My initial thoughts were, "Oh well, just another scallywag", and I opened the door and went inside. I also, as is my routine, made sure the door shut and locked automatically before ascending the stairs to my flat. Once in the flat I automatically put the kettle on to boil and removed my jacket. But something was bothering me, I could not get the image of that person sitting on the ground by the back gate off my mind. My thoughts were playing ping pong in my head as I swayed from "Oh leave them to get on with it" and "but what if they need help and there's only me to give it". I just couldn't make up my mind what to do next.

Eventually, after pacing up and down the living room at least 20 times, I decided I had to go down and find out for myself. I knew that if something happened to that person I, at least, wouldn't be able to forgive myself.

I didn't bother to put my jacket on, I didn't even lock the flat door. Instead, I quickly went down stairs, I walked towards the gate and saw the person still sitting there in the same pose as I had seen earlier.

As I approached, I said "Hello, are you ok there?". With that the person lifted their head and looked straight at me and I could see it was a young woman of perhaps 25 or so. "Yes, I'm ok", she said, "I'm sorry but I've got nowhere else to go, it's just for tonight. Tomorrow I'll be ok. I can go with friends. Can I just stay here for tonight please".

I didn't really know what to say, this wasn't what I expected. The girl spoke pretty good English, possibly with an Eastern European accent and behind the sadness of the forced smile I could see that she was quite pretty.

"Well", I said, "Of course you can stay here if you must but can't you go to your friends tonight. What if it turns very cold, will you be alright?".

"Yes, I'll be ok" she replied. "I can't go tonight, but tomorrow I will be ok".

"Ok then, but I'll keep an eye on the weather just in case. If it rains ring me" and I told her my number and told her how to use the intercom at the front and then searched in my pockets and gave her what change I had there. "Here, take this, get something to eat if you are hungry, there's a place just down the road".

She took the money and thanked me twice. I just smiled and went back to my flat, boiled the kettle again and returned to my own personal comforts, eventually going to bed and sleeping right through until the alarm woke me up at 6.30.

As routine dictates, I went to the loo, then put the kettle on to boil and placed two slices of bread in the toaster. Then I remembered the girl. I looked out of the kitchen window not knowing what to expect and saw that she was gone. She had left the place by the gate and I could relax again.

I finished my breakfast, had a shower and got dressed for work. I put my watch on, picked up my phone and wallet and left the flat. The communal door at the bottom of the stairs opened with a push and as it was daylight I decided to take short route to the car via the side gate. The side gate was locked, as it should be, so I unlocked it but before I was able to pass through I noticed something on the floor. It was a piece of paper, only about two inches square, but it was folded so that it stood up on the ground. I picked it up to see what it was and opened it to see it was a note written in pencil and it read "Thank you for letting me stay in your garden last night, may God bless you, you are a kind person".

I read the note twice more just to make sure I wasn't mistaken. It almost brought a tear to my eye. What I did was very pretty minimal but what she did for me was immeasurable.

I went to work unable to keep this note to myself. She didn't have to say or do anything, but she found a small piece of paper and a pencil and took the trouble to leave me such a thoughtful gift. I had to show it to all my friends and colleagues.

That night after dinner, I kept looking out of the kitchen window to see if she would come back, she didn't and I was again having mixed feelings. I was happy that, hopefully, she had met up with her friends and had a place to stay, but I was also disappointed that I didn't even find out her name or anything about her

For quite some time after that I kept the note in my wallet and occasionally I showed it to my closer friends and family. But one day I opened my wallet and it was gone, but still I'm constantly reminded that what you see is not always what you think.