

Community Care

My Dosser

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I live in a basement flat in Central London. Three years ago I opened my front door and found a woman asleep outside. She seemed about 55-years-old. I had never seen her before. Since then she has used this area for sleeping purposes and has slowly acquired prescriptive rights over my doorstep and over the disused coke cellar adjacent to it (where she stores her possessions). Before she turned up on my doorstep she had tried sleeping in several other doorways in the vicinity, but my neighbours are all, to varying degrees, afraid of her. She is only a small woman, weighing perhaps 8 stone and rather frail, so clearly she represents no physical danger, but her strangeness may put people in mind of a witch.

When I speak to her on a neutral subject—say the weather—she is affable, even fawning. Almost always when I pass her on the doorstep she asks me how I am, and concludes our conversation by bidding me have a good day. On other subjects (such as her own past history) she is evasive, though her accent and vocabulary betray some education. She was, she says, in the WRNS during the War, working as a signals clerk: and she apparently has also worked in a typing pool. When I first asked her why she chose to sleep rough, she closed the discussion with: “That is my misfortune”.

Occasionally she seems to spend a night or two away from my doorstep. When I subsequently ask her where she has been, she replies airily: “Oh, to my friends in Sussex”. But I have no idea if that is true. When offered help, she always declines. She never complains of her situation, though she often rages outside my door about losing things in the dark. Sometimes in the morning she makes wailing sounds which she explains by claiming to have had bad dreams. For two years (including the severe winter of 1978–1979) she seemed content to sleep on the concrete floor of my doorway where she is sheltered from the rain. She must be hardy because she was dressed merely in outdoor clothes even when there were several degrees of frost. In more recent months (per-

haps having satisfied herself that I am unlikely to throw her out) she has acquired a piece of carpet to lie on and some more coats.

Unlike many dossers she does not drink. But she does have some symptoms of psychiatric interest. When I speak to her, she is perfectly rational, if evasive. But when I close my front door, she chatters to herself in a manner that is very different from the ordinary conversations that most people hold with themselves. Her speech with herself is both repetitive and meaningless. It is as if a tape-loop were being played and replayed on a tape recorder. At such times her speech is frequently violent and obscene. It is interspersed with neologisms and with explosive noises of the sort made by Gilles de la Tourette patients. However, these noises are not uncontrollable: when I open my front door she is instantly a rational person, ready—perhaps indeed eager in her willingness to appease me—for conversation.

She seems anxious to avoid authority. A worker in the local Community Health Council tells me that when she approached the dosser, she absolutely refused to speak to her. And on another occasion, when the dosser saw me speaking to a policeman on the pavement, she hobbled quickly away and did not appear again on my doorstep for two days. (I assume that she surmised falsely that I was seeking assistance to evict her.)

She often asks me the time, but it is not clear that it makes much difference to her. There are a number of 24-hour fast-food shops around, and as far as I know she feeds exclusively at these, sometimes at their outdoor counters, and sometimes (if they are forbearing) inside. Forbearance is required on the part of shop managers because she smells, and her appearance makes other customers uneasy. In the street she always holds her head downwards so that she is staring at the ground, and she sometimes prefers to walk in the gutter rather than on the pavement. Sometimes she shouts in the streets, and though it is clear that she is angry it is not clear what she is angry about. The

police are tolerant about such episodes, but doubtless such tolerance is based on previous frustrating experience of rounding up smelly, abusive vagrants.

My dossier's health seems good, but one of her legs is badly swollen, bent outward at the knee, and permanently ulcerated. She claims to visit a local hospital for treatment of the leg, but I have no idea if that is true.

I have no idea either where her money comes from, though she never seems short of it. At night she often gets irritated in the dark outside my door and throws her possessions around—her clothes, cigarettes, matches, safety pins and loose change—but I think she is never so irrational as to throw away paper money.

A homeless person in Central London is dependent on public lavatories. These, of course, close at different times, but all, as far as I know, are closed by midnight. My dossier's activities are not closely related to the time of day, so when she first arrived she regularly urinated and defaecated beside my doorway. After repeated violent protests from me (coupled with threats of the ultimate sanction of throwing her off my

doorstep) she ceased defaecating, but continues to urinate there.

She says she has no living first-degree relatives. She once remarked that she had been married, but followed this with the improbable observation that her husband had had seven sisters who were somehow instrumental in the breakdown of the marriage.

I offer this brief description of a derelict person to illustrate the poverty of information that I have managed to elicit during frequent chats with her over three years. I still have no clear idea what caused her originally to become a dossier: it may have been a degree of urinary incontinence, or the reaction of others to her noisy conversations with herself or her own taste for independence. I have no idea where her money comes from, nor whether she has any friends (other than myself). She comes and goes at all hours, but I have no idea where she has been when she returns to my doorstep muttering to herself in the middle of the night. To study a person of this sort, one would need to have the inclinations and facilities of a private detective.

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