

SIX OF THE BEST (1791 words)

By Michael Percy

“I’m sorry to trouble you but this is Sergeant Wilkinson from Paddington Green Station. Who am I speaking to?”

“Nancy... Hold on, this could be anybody calling me in the middle of the night. What is it about?”

“Are you Nancy Procter...?”

“Say what this is about or I’ll cut you off.”

“We have a David Procter at the station.”

“Is this bad news?”

“Only in as much as Mr Procter has been arrested and we found your name in his phone. I assume you are a relative – sister, wife?”

“Ex-wife of six years standing. What trouble is he in?”

“He’s been offered a police caution but has refused to be bound by it. He says he wants his day in court.”

“Oh dear.”

“Exactly. He seems very...”

“Stubborn.”

“Exactly. He was taking part in a protest outside a private residence in Kensington and things got heated.”

“Heated?”

“Windows were broken.”

“Is this the home of that businessman Clayton Humphries, the one involved in the tax evasion scandal? David has been tweeting about him for weeks.”

“We have seen the tweets. He sails very close to the wind – he ought to take care what he writes on Twitter. Your husband will have to appear in court charged with obstructing the police in the execution of their duty unless he accepts the caution. It will cause an awful lot of unnecessary work for something quite minor.”

“David will not care about that. Did he break the window?”

“No, that wouldn’t be a caution – criminal damage is more serious. He tried to prevent the arrest of the young lady who did the deed.”

“Was that woman called Naomi Routledge?”

“I can’t say.”

“I suspect it was. She’s leading the protest that David joined. Look, I don’t want to appear unhelpful but I am not going to drive all the way to London in the middle of the night – the man is my ex-husband. We were together a long time but that all finished six years ago. He’s on his own as far as I’m concerned.”

The policeman knew how to use silence as a weapon.

“That may sound hard officer but... It’s not my place any more to...”

Silence.

“I’m sorry, I am really not coming out in the middle of the night.”

More silence.

“Perhaps I’ll ring in the morning. Wilkinson you say?”

“Sergeant Wilkinson yes. I’ll leave it with you. He’s really being very silly over this.”

Bugger the man. I know what he’s doing, I can picture it – standing on his rights, speaking up for the down-trodden – in this case the arrested Naomi Routledge who I am sure knows exactly what she’s about – good luck to them both.

Getting arrested will be exactly what he wants and he will milk it like a thirsty man who found a cow in the desert. His tweets became more provocative

towards Clayton Humphries, in fact most of what he wrote about the man was libellous and I expected him to get sued – it could still happen. But that’s the way David’s mind works, in this case libel someone so they take you to court and then their wrong-doing will come out. But Humphries is worth millions – he’s on the Times rich list for God’s sake – and what person in their right mind takes on a millionaire in the British courts?

David’s whole life has been one long tirade against one thing after another. I used to dread Thursday nights and BBC’s Question Time when David would spend the whole hour shouting at the screen.

I knew what he was like when we married but then it was exciting. Our first proper date after school was a teach-in on Vietnam, the second was a college production of *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder. That’s the way it started and our lives together were built round campaigns, marches and demonstrations – the Vietnam War, Anti-Apartheid, Nelson Mandela, CND, striking miners, Polaris, Greenham Common, Solidarity, gay rights, the poll tax, G20, the Iraq war, - and most recently Capitalism – that should be a doddle! These were causes I cared about as well but I was ready to step down when we got our bus passes.

I knew I wouldn’t get back to sleep so I thought I would unwind with a bit of late night rubbish television. The set tuned into one of those re-runs of old editions of *Top Of The Pops* and the song they were playing was *The House Of The Rising Sun*. Will I not be able to forget that man tonight? That song was something he loved when I first met him at school. He was in a band – wasn’t everybody – and *Rising Sun* was something we practised incessantly in his parents’ garage – yes, I was a singer at age fifteen, watch your back Cilla.

That was the first time I saw David conduct one of his campaigns. It was 1964 during the Cold War when we were all convinced our world could end in just four minutes – the time it took for a Russian missile to reach Britain. Today it’s hard to appreciate the tension we felt living in constant fear of hearing the sirens.

The government had just distributed a booklet called *Protect and Survive* which explained how to prepare for a nuclear attack and what to do in the aftermath.

That booklet brought David and me together. Without it I would have ignored him like everybody else in the class. The children kept David at arm length because, even then, he was just too passionate. In a run of the mill secondary school, talking about the Cold War and politics placed David in a friendless bubble, but that was David: a spotty teenager with a CND badge on his duffel coat who nobody bothered to get to know.

Until the day our form master decided to drill us on what to do if the siren sounded while we were at school.

Mr Fisher read from the booklet, "In the event of a Russian surprise attack on the United Kingdom the sirens will be sounded. This will be a rising and falling continuous note."

Naturally all the boys began to imitate the sound of a warning siren. I suppose they had all heard it in films about the Second World War.

"Be Quiet," shouted Mr Fisher. "The sirens mean we are in imminent danger of attack."

"Excuse me sir," it was Pete Frost the class bully. "What would you do sir if you only had four minutes to live sir?"

"I'm trying to tell you what to do Frost, if you would just be quiet."

"My brother says he would jump on his motor bike and get round to his girlfriend's house. He said he doesn't want to die without having had a sha..."

"FROST," shouted Mr Fisher.

There were jeers and cat-calls from most of the boys and embarrassed giggles from the girls.

"This is a serious matter Frost. Be quiet and sit down." After a few minutes, when the hubbub subsided, Mr Fisher continued. "This school is not equipped with proper bomb shelters so we are advised to get under our desks to protect ourselves from falling masonry, pieces of plaster etcetera. It is important this is done in an orderly, calm and quiet manner. I have the school gramophone here and I will play a recording of the warning siren and I want you to all calmly and quietly get under your desks."

Mr Fisher dropped the needle into the groove and the horrible wailing sound of the siren filled the room. Then the sound from the gramophone was drowned under the noise and shouts of thirty-three children crawling under their desks, making as much noise as possible.

All except one: David. He stood alone at the back of the class in silent protest.

“Did you hear me Procter?” asked Mr Fisher. “I said get under your desk.”

These firm words caused various small heads to appear from below the desks keen to find out who had got it wrong.

“No sir,” said David.

“Careful boy. You have ten seconds to disappear from my sight. Under your desk. Move.”

“No Sir.”

Mr Fisher opened the drawer in his desk, lifted out an old grey plimsole and placed it where all could see. “Get down boy, like everybody else.” His voice was sinister now, full of menace and warning.

More heads popped up to witness the confrontation.

“No sir. This is a waste of time.”

“Do what you are told boy. Last warning.”

David swallowed hard, the fear was showing. “My father says that the Protect and Survive booklet is designed to mislead the public into thinking nuclear war is surv...” he stumbled over the word ‘Survivable’.

David had turned beetroot red and now every head had bobbed above its desk to see this challenge unfold. All eyes in the room were focussed on Mr Fisher.

“Six strokes of the slipper Procter. And I do not care what your father says.”

“We should not be led blindfold into a war that will result in the destruction of civilisation.”

“Twelve,” said Mr Fisher.

“The flash will blind us and melt our bodies and the blast will flatten the school. Getting under our desks is useless.”

Mr Fisher simply stared at David. All the disembodied heads in the room swung to look at the coming hero, waiting for his reaction.

“Ban the Bomb,” shouted David at the top of his voice.

“Headmaster’s office now. It’s the cane for you Procter.”

At a single stroke, well actually six strokes from the headmaster’s cane, David became the school hero.

It was not long before CND badges were popping up on blazers throughout the school – I wore two of them to make sure David knew where I stood. Then David noticed me and I was invited to go with him and his parents on part of the CND march from Aldermaston into London.

It opened my mind to a world where people debated and sang and cheered and chanted; they were passionate people who were prepared to make sacrifices for something they believed in.

They were people like David.

Now, over fifty years later, David still cares about things in a time when people are so busy with their own affairs that they never lift their eyes to marvel at a sunset or dream with the stars.

The man was not going to let me rest that night. Sod him. But I’m not shifting out of my flat in the cold and dark to extract him from a police cell - it’s the last thing he would want me to do. Now a defence fund, that’s a different matter. Twitter’s a good place to start.

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