



Man vs Nanny State

by Jamie Mitchinson

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They are out walking in the Chilterns. For a while he fancies Trudi is lost, as she leads him through a quiet beech woodland in search of the road they're meant to be on; but no, there is method there, and he can see light peeking out between the trees a hundred yards further. He quickens his step and draws by her side, as if to say, I believed you all along. For the sake of gallantry he helps her over the old gate and onto the road, then deigns to check his phone, the vibrations of which he placidly ignored some half an hour ago in favour of the trees, the country air, the birdsong. He is not the kind of man to jump every time the modern world tells him to jump.

It is 01293 895100, again. Familiar, but not one of his friends. He doesn't listen to the answerphone message, and puts the phone away. He turns to Trudi.

'Let's take five.'

'You can take two,' she says, and it is decided.

While his fingers are in his pocket he checks his keys, and worries whether he remembered to lock the back door. Feeling hungry, he moves on to wonder how much food they have left in the fridge-freezer at home, and visualises the supply of fish fingers and microwave meals that Trudi and he so passionately loathe; then he realises he's beginning to worry about the ridiculous, and returns to the here and now. Without a word between them, they stop to raid their supplies. It seems almost miraculous, this understanding. He turns his back to her and she unzips his daysack. She pulls out her water, takes a swig and replaces it, then passes him his camera. Obliging he aims it along the road, which disappears over the brow of the hill. It could be the edge of the world. There is nothing above the hill but white space.

The silhouette of a small dog appears on hilltop, quite without warning. If it had stopped to cock its leg ten yards previously, or ten yards further on, he'd not have noticed it, but there it is, in heroic silhouette, cocking its leg over the hill for all the world to see. This, he imagines, is how the really top dogs mark their territory. No fannying about with scents in shrubs and bushes for this little chappie. The dog peers into the distance like a hero of the revolution.

The silhouette for a responsible owner appears, a few moments later, seeming to grow out of the ground over the space of a few seconds. She berates the animal. Shame on her.

This pair's appearance on the crest of the hill, without any of the usual preliminaries of having to climb the thing, reminds him how Trudi seemed when he first met her. Until then he'd taken it for granted, considered it common sense, that behind every swan were two furiously pedalling feet, and that if one only looked out for it all of us were visibly mired in the same furious struggle to tread water in life, let alone flourish. But Trudi was queen of the castle from the very start. He's never seen her struggle for anything. The first he saw of her was with a glass of champagne at the annual ball, looking like she'd glided on polished parquet floors all her life. He talked to her about Wagner, because he'd understood, from what he'd heard, that that was what moved her.

She pointed out that the ideological foundation of the music, whether to one's satisfaction or not, could not detract from its quality. So he said yes, the ideological background of the music cannot detract from its quality. She suggested with a smile that he was using the fig-leaf of opera to try to appear civilised. So he said yes, he was. Exactly so. Then, in that respect, she compared him to some Nazi or other. So he said no, not entirely, because his careers adviser at school had said he should keep his options open as long as possible, but at this stage in his life he wasn't ready to go down the fascist path, and the hours were quite long, even if they were regular and on time, so - then she had floated away, but with high cheeks, which he came to realise later was as near to smiling as she ever got. A discerning lady. People thought she was aloof, but he saw it as something more like subtlety. There was nothing common or garden about her. He appreciated that, even if no-one else did. She had a rack of quite some bearing. She laughed when he told her that.

He thinks it's good to get away for the weekend. Out on the Friday, then two nights in the Old Bull Hotel again, just near enough the youth hostel to enjoy a feeling of superiority, over ordinary people, and over his former self. Then back on Sunday. He'll be able to forget his everyday worries. That very determined idiot from the council phoning again and again (fortunately he recognises her number now and knows not to answer it). He could do without her. Also, that conversation with the surveyor. The surveyor wondered why anyone would plant a Leylandii so close to their house. It was a hideous tree, and it was hardly surprising it was already smothering the bedroom window at the back. He should consider its impact on the

neighbours, and if *I were you* he should take it down, and then he'd be able to see his garden again. He explained to the surveyor that actually, we just use that room for storage. No kids, you see.

As he reflects on this, his phone rings again. He checks the number.

01293 895100, again.

He pops the phone back in his pocket, and it duly stops.

Yes, it seems to him that a lot of people in Busybody Britain are taking too much interest in how he manages his affairs, and perhaps a few redundancies in the economy might well serve to focus the national mind. He's in the middle of expressing this view to Trudi, as they walk up the hill, when she looks at him and he realises something more interesting than him has appeared within view – a pub called The Three Ships. He remembers it from the last time they came for a break here, a few weeks ago. They set sail to an engagement with its pub menu.

Inside, he declares his love for Steak and Ale Pie, and the plain girl behind the bar takes note. Trudi nudges him and points at Duck a l'Orange – points at it, practically smiles at it, laughs out loud at it. Then sighs at Confit of Salmon. She declares to the girl that she will have the pea soup, providing the chef is not using chicken stock. The girl thinks a moment, promises that he isn't, takes Trudi's money, and goes to hide in the kitchen for a little.

'Here for the weekend?' says the amiable-looking landlady, looking round from the cash register. 'London, I guess?'

It appears this introduction is aimed at Trudi and himself. Unfortunately the woman is definitely looking in their direction, with a light of interest in her eyes. It's a shame the bar isn't a little busier.

'No, we're from Crawley. Nice place, this. We get away here quite often now. Wouldn't mind living here myself.'

'Lot of retired people round here, you'll notice. Though I suppose if you had kids, well. You'd be better off in the suburbs. Or where you folk are. Not so much for young people round here.'

'Actually, to us that's half the charm. We've never been particularly broody, Trudi and I. We've got things worked out quite nicely, our own way.'

The woman nods politely, and ventures nothing more on the subject. She has that same wary look the surveyor had, as if she's been told very slightly more than she'd really asked to know. Trudi looks defensive though, and kicks in before the subject can be changed. 'Having kids is not all it's cracked up to be. We've seen that

with some of our friends. They lost their freedom. They had dreams once – to work with their hands, or start a second hand bookshop, that sort of thing. And how many of them actually have? Kids and their needs just take over. We decided – we'll never let that happen to us.'

The explanation is interrupted by some banging and shouting in the kitchen.

'Let me out!' he says to his wife. She laughs almost before he says it. He pretends to rattle the bars of a cage. Trudi shoots a look back at him that says, desire. They say no more.

'Our new chef,' says the woman, ignoring their private joke. 'Must be getting used to the menu.' She disappears into the kitchen to investigate, just as the girl comes back out.

Trudi looks round and mutters. 'How hard can pea soup be?'

He hopes it will be liquid, and reasonably tasty. Right now Trudi looks like the woman he first met ten years ago, imperious, dangerous, wicked. It would be a shame for anything to break that spell before they reach the hotel. He gets in a pale ale and a double whisky, to keep the good times rolling. Feeling pleasantly merry on credit, he watches the girl tugging at what now seems to him a distinctly priapic hand-operated pump, and this battle makes him thoughtful for a while. Trudi idly hums a quiet aria next to him. Not for the first time, this dignified accompaniment is adding a veneer of civilisation to his most private thoughts, and he doesn't feel the least ashamed.

His phone rings. Fully relaxed, and forgetting his embargo against accepting calls while he's on holiday, he takes the call.

'Yip?'

Straight away he has an intuition that it's the surveyor again, about the tree. He thinks someone should tell the man he's a surveyor and not Capability Brown. The vistas from his rear bedroom window or his neighbour's garden are not anybody else's business. But no, the number that flashed up was the same as before - 01293 895100.

'Mr Bailey,' says a cold, bureaucratic voice. 'It's Jackie here. Jackie Lewis, from social services. We need to talk to you about Christopher.'

Trudi, listening in, rolls her eyes. The boy has his fish fingers, after all.

He cuts the call. He doesn't take it personally. It's almost a game they play, Jackie and himself. She very often phones him at around lunchtime. Consequently

he feels like Pavlov's dog when the phone rings. He can practically taste the steak and ale pie already. When it comes, he will tear into it like a wild thing.

The girl flags their attention, and directs them to sit down at one of the tables in the restaurant area. He's starting to warm to her. He doubts that she could possibly have known for sure what stock was used in the pea soup, but it was good that she pretended anyway. Trudi senses doubt, and exposes it whenever she can. So bonus points to this girl for avoidance of conflict, and for gumption. If there is chicken stock, Trudi will taste it. It's a bigger risk than the girl realises.

Trudi's aria has resumed, the soundtrack to all his hungers.