



THE MADNESS OF CROWDS

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Andy pushed through the swarming pedestrians of Oxford Street. Feeble drizzle nuzzled his neck. They'd closed Tottenham Court Road station again, because of a bomb scare or a fire alert or a sandwich on the line or some bloody nonsense like that. He'd had to stomp all the way here from the corner of Charing Cross Road, past the late-opening fashion shops with crowds of low-rent Lolas window-shopping and smoking on the pavement, past the mobile phone outlets and music shops blasting passers-by with the latest in a long, dark line of MOR indie hits by bands whose names were the most interesting thing about them.

And he was pissed off.

Someone thumped him with a heavy bag, accidentally but infuriatingly, as the thick crowd urged itself down the steps to the underground like toothpaste trying to squeeze back into the womb of its tube. It wasn't really working: the steps were tight with a slow sludge of people going nowhere fast. He wiped the sweaty rain from his face and shoved his Metro further into his armpit so it wouldn't get

wet. As he glanced up to the railings that guarded the entrance to the station he saw that the Jesus man was there again.

Andy rarely used Oxford Circus but whenever he did the Jesus man seemed to be there, an all-weather evangelist urging indifferent, murder-faced commuters to be a winner, not a sinner, and quoting various memorised passages of the Bible through his battered megaphone. His sermonising seemed to be pretty much improvised most of the time, but followed the same basic pattern.

‘Don’t be a sinner, be a winner! Jesus died for your sins. Let Christ into your life.’

Andy wondered how long the Jesus man would pursue any given topic before repeating himself. Five minutes on sin? Ten on embracing the love of Jesus in your heart? Did he have a set of messages he wanted to get across to as many people in as little time as possible, like the thirty-second window of opportunity for TV commercials? Or did he just stand there and say whatever came into his head? Given that the man was obviously such a diehard god-botherer, anything that occurred was bound to have some relation to religion. It was the sort of thing you couldn’t pay people to do, and yet the Jesus man did it voluntarily, day after day and year after year just because he felt he had to. It was admirable, in a way. He had a lot more dedication and passion for his self-appointed job than the wage-slaves of Oxford Circus.

Andy stood in the pulsing throng, letting its undulations massage him. If he relaxed and forgot about getting anywhere fast, it was actually quite comforting, quite relaxing, to be in the warm moist press of bodies. He could lean his weight on the people next to him, let himself sway and shift with the movements of the crowd.

The Jesus man was still talking. He was quoting the passage about God giving people strength, the one Andy's old headmaster had always trotted out. Isaiah something.

'Have you not known? Have you not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, faints not, nor is weary? There is no searching of his understanding. He gives power to the faint; and to them that have no might he gives them strength'

The words seemed to give him courage to extemporise on his theme.

'That's what God does, people, that's what Jesus does. He lifts you up, he gives you strength. And that's what you should do. Love and give. Don't hate and take, love and give like Jesus does to you. Do unto others as you would have done unto you, folks. Do what Jesus would do!'

The Jesus man's accent was vaguely Northern; Andy couldn't quite place it. His dirty blond hair was plastered to his forehead but he didn't seem to notice.

'But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint'.

Andy smiled in recognition. It was nice, that bit about eagles. It was the only part of the Bible Andy knew, apart from the first line of Genesis and St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the faith hope and charity one you always heard at weddings.

He wondered what it was that kept the Jesus man out there every day in rush hour, trying to spread the word, trying to save souls, or just one, perhaps, just one soul among the thousands who saw and ignored him every day. Andy supposed that for a really dedicated

Christian that would be enough. Maybe one soul in a lifetime would be enough. It was more than you started with, anyway. The Jesus man was back on his sinner/winner patter. Andy looked at the people around him. Most of them looked like sinners to him. They looked like they wanted to kill someone. One woman was staring at the Jesus man and mouthing 'shut up'. Her lips, glossy and pink, pushed forward in a cartoon pout.

Andy stared back at the Jesus man. He was coping with the rain and the general shitty misery of the day much better than the commuters, who after all would be warm and dry underground in a few minutes. The Jesus man dressed like a recovering alcoholic, which perhaps he was. His hair was longish and curlyish, and looked like it hadn't been cut for a while. He was wearing well-worn stonewashed jeans and a nondescript denim jacket. His thin white t-shirt was turning transparent in the rain. Andy could see patches of the Jesus man's skinny, hairless chest through it. The effect was rather like Jon Bon Jovi on Skid Row.

There was a silent flash in the sky, followed a few seconds later by a crack of thunder, a whipping increase in the intensity and chill of the rain, and a general groan from the crowd. The Jesus man turned his head and looked directly at Andy. His eyes streamed blue above the orange plastic of the megaphone.

'Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be you dismayed: for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go'.

The carriage was packed and fusty with wet wool and body heat. The lucky people who had fought or dashed their way to seats leaned back

in them like thrones, gently steaming. Andy thought of proud Nebuchadnezzar, and the writing on the wall. As the carriage doors closed there was a general shuffling and shifting of bags and feet as a few stragglers squeezed in, the human Tetris of each person fitting themselves into the available space. The doors banged and beeped, the carriage lurched and the darkness of the tunnel closed over them all.

The train stopped at Green Park and about a third of the carriage flooded off to change for the Piccadilly or Jubilee line. Squirrel-swift, Andy nabbed a seat from beneath the retreating bottom of a large black woman in a white suit. A young couple got on and stood in front of him, clinging to the same pole: they were French or possibly Spanish, and they muttered sweet foreign nothings into one another's hair in between kisses in which Andy could not help but see a flicker of tongue. Andy shook out his Metro and tried to ignore them.

A minute or two into the journey to Warren Street, Andy began to feel sick. Except it wasn't the queasy water of nausea filling his belly: it felt like fire. Fire and hunger. A hot gnawing. He could feel the couples entwined legs squashed up against his own. The woman was moving her leg rhythmically against the man's. She didn't seem to notice that she was rubbing Andy's trousers too. In the sickly carriage light their tongues twined like snakes. Andy glanced around and saw other people looking at the oblivious pair, distaste and fascination mingling in their eyes. A wedding ring flashed on the woman's finger: perhaps they were newlyweds.

If only they'd keep it to the honeymoon suite. But then the man raised his hand to brush the woman's face and his wedding finger was bare. Andy stared. He felt like he had been punched in the stomach. He was actually shocked. He could not remember the last time he had

felt shocked. The lightning on the street flashed behind his eyes.

A phrase popped into his head from nowhere:

‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’.

He looked around at his fellow sinners, their faces drawn and wan in the Purgatorial half-light between stations. He recognised some of them from the bottleneck at Oxford Circus. They were all staring at the couple. The woman with the glossy pink lips was pushing them forward again, mouthing something. It had a pouty ‘sha’ in it, but it wasn’t ‘shut up’, not this time. He looked back at his Metro. Maybe he’d get off at Warren Street, walk the rest of the way.

The carriage pulled in at Warren Street and there was a changing of the guard, people changing for the Northern Line this time. At least he wasn’t on the Northern line, thought Andy. He should count his blessings. The carriage jerked and squealed into the next tunnel. Even when the lights flickered out for a second, Andy could feel the couple’s bodies swaying against him with the motion of the train; hear the wet slap of them kissing. They sounded like dying fish. He bent his head and pushed his fingers into his ears. It was when he was crouched like this that he felt the train lurch to a stop and dimly heard the burr of the driver’s announcement. He didn’t try to listen: he could never understand them through the speakers. These mid-tunnel stops could last anything up to ten minutes. Andy had never been claustrophobic, but he hated it when this happened, more than almost anything else. He felt sweat trickle down the back of his neck. The hot blackness behind his eyes was like the anteroom to Hell.

‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’.

It was a small quiet voice, but it wasn’t in his head this time.

Andy unblocked his ears and looked around, startled. It was the

pink-lipped woman. Her mouth was hard and tight now. She stood up. The couple did not or chose not to notice her. Their tongues wormed inside each other's mouths. Andy felt the fire again, hotter, sicker. He felt dizzy with righteous indignation. They were flaunting themselves, parading their sin, their lust. It was more than decent people could stand and at last somebody was doing something about it. In his peripheral vision, he could see a row of upturned pale faces turned in their direction, watching the three.

Andy watched too, hypnotised, as the pink-lipped woman put her hands between the lovers and tried to push them apart. The man felt her first. He shook her hand from his chest as though it were something slimy and put a protective arm around his girlfriend.

'What the fuck?'

A French accent; but he had some English, evidently.

'Stop that. Stop it right now'.

The pink-lipped woman was spitting a little, flecking the man's jacket.

'There are decent people here. Take your adultery elsewhere'.

'Jesus Christ, man, leave us alone! We're just kissing, you know?'

Andy winced as he heard the name of the Lord. The flames in his gut rose higher. He felt a mad itch, like his skin was blistering, burning from the inside. Someone had to do something. A handsome Asian man in a cashmere coat, well-built, taller and heavier by a fair bit than the Frenchman, rose from his seat in a smooth motion. He leaned over the intervening commuters, whose heads were bent into their newspapers as though in prayer, and pushed a long finger into the boy's shoulder.

'Don't you take the name of the Lord in vain'.

Andy felt a spurt of joy. It wasn't just him. Other people felt the same. They had taken as much of the sin and squalor of this evil city, this Gomorrah, as they could, and now they were lifting their voices up, and they would be heard.

Andy suddenly realised that the Asian man, too, had been at Oxford Circus. He had been reading the Guardian and texting someone, probably to tell them he was going to be late. But he had heard and seen the Jesus man. He must have. He too had heard the Word.

The French boy and his whore looked utterly confused. Even if there was a language barrier, it was impossible that they didn't understand what they had done wrong, thought Andy. Their defensiveness was a sign of their guilt. The girl slapped the Asian man's hand away from her boyfriend's chest.

'Get off him! Christ, what's wrong with you?'

Again the blasphemy. Again that sick shock. Andy felt violated, but so, it seemed, did everyone else in the carriage. Andy recognised more and more of their faces from Oxford Circus as they rose from their seats. Other people moving through the loose crowd, which had thinned as the train travelled North, weaving their way towards the sinners with shark-like singleness of purpose. The girl was beginning to look frightened now, as well she might. She had been caught out and she knew it. She could see her punishment approaching.

Now the boy tried to defend her, step in front of her, but he was no better than she and no match for the anger of the crowd. The pink-lipped woman pushed past him and grabbed the girl's hair. The girl's eyes opened white and wide in surprise. She gave a little yelp of pain as the other woman jerked her head back. Andy smiled and stood up,

standing at the back of the crowd, preparing to watch justice have its inexorable way.

The people at the front of the crowd pressed closer in, trying to get to the girl, but the French boy was still in their way. He drew back his arm and landed a clumsy punch on a small blond man who was struggling against him. His fist glanced off the man's cheekbone, losing power and deflecting to the shoulder of the Asian man, who was standing next to him. Andy didn't see how the punch could have hurt the blond man very much, but he yelled in anger, a surprisingly loud, harsh voice for such a small man, and began slapping the French boy hard and fast with his open palms.

'How dare you raise your hand to me?'

Other hands were joining in now, slapping and smacking and hitting and poking, aiming not just at the boy but the girl too, who cowered near the floor of the carriage. The cracking of flesh on flesh sounded like tropical rain. There was a hilarious, riotous joy in it, in chastising those who sinned, in the restoration of the moral balance. He could feel the rightness of it thrill in his bones. Andy shoved a little forward to get a better look, perhaps to administer a slap or two himself, to join in the sacred orgy of punishment. He felt like a terrible angel.

The girl was foetal on the wooden slats of the carriage floor now. Some of her clothes were ripped where people had manhandled her, pulled and tugged. Somebody must have had sharp nails, or a ring, because she had a swelling cut on her face already. Her boyfriend's shouts were muffled by the bodies of the crowd but she was still and silent. Andy looked down into her eyes. She knew it was over. He could finish her. He could do what 'STOP!'

It was a dreadful voice, a voice of thunder and fire. It was a voice louder even than the guttural cries of the bloodthirsty crowd. Andy felt his lips move, and put his fingers up to them in surprise. Had the voice been him? Tears stood in his eyes. He put a hand on the girl's head. He could feel a bruise throbbing up from her scalp, soft and pulpy under his fingers. His mouth opened again. He wondered what he was going to say.

'Let he—'

His mouth was dry and sticky, as though he'd been chewing gum. He parted his lips and the words came out. He hoped they were the right ones.

'Let he who is without sin cast the first stone,' he said.

Was that right? The pink-lipped woman, her face red now and shining, glared up at him. He met her gaze. He remembered drunken one-night stands, friends betrayed, little things stolen here and there. He remembered pub brawls and the year he didn't speak to his parents. He remembered trying to kiss his best friend's wife last Christmas but one. And she remembered things too. He could see it in her eyes. The lust for punishment was dying out of them. In the silence, they all remembered.

One by one, the crowd returned to their seats. Andy helped the girl towards his own seat and she flopped into it, shivering with shock. Other people helped the French boy off, dusted him down. He was given a seat next to his girlfriend.

The train started with a judder, and the lights flickered, brightened, fluttered against the black walls of the tunnel as they set off again, the smooth clicking soothing rhythm of train against track.

By the time they reached Euston, Andy could not quite remember

what had happened in the tunnel, and he saw looks of confusion on the faces of some of the others who he had recognised from Oxford Circus, too. He knew it had been something quite odd, but for the life of him he couldn't think what it was. He wondered if maybe he'd had a panic attack and blacked out. Or maybe someone else had. There was a girl in his seat and she looked like she'd fallen over; her clothes were scuffed and torn and she had a cut on her face. Perhaps she had fainted and he'd offered her his seat. She looked very pale. That was probably it. Andy nodded to himself. He'd given her his seat. That's what any decent person would have done.

First published by [Pulp Net](http://www.pulp.net)

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