



THE STICKER KING

Kate Pullinger

It was the rooftops that attracted her, made her get up, move away from her desk. She could see them out the window: terracotta chimney pots, like massed rows of Chinese warrior-statues, and television aerials, spindly, makeshift. The big, bossy buildings of Broadgate on the left, like fat squat bankers with square heads, shabby council blocks straight ahead, down-at-heel, declaring their refugee status. It wasn't a romantic view, apart from Spitalfield's church off to the right, Hawksmoor's giant tardis of a building. She wanted to dance across the rooftops and impale herself on the spire.

That was on bad days. On good days she was content to watch the sky; if she opened the window she would smell curry. But the windows didn't open. And there were lots of bad days.

At Whitechapel she met a man who said his name was Frank. She was on her way to buy a sandwich for lunch; she'd take it back and eat in front of her computer. She stopped to speak to him because — well, she wasn't sure why, usually she never stopped for anyone or anything. 'Sticker King of East London,' he said by way of an introduction. He kept his stickers in an A4 paper box. He displayed them for her cupped in the palm of his hand, one at a time, as though they were precious, fragile things.

'Go on, make me Gay.'

'Help! I'm Happy.'

Plain white rectangular stickers, slogans hand-written with black felt tip.

'Brother Man: You are Me.'

'Where do you put them?' she asked.

He looked at her as though she was stupid, then spread his arms wide to indicate: London. My domain.

And he was telling the truth, his stickers were everywhere: lampposts, walls, hoardings, railings, bus stops, kerbstones, pavements. She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed before. But she was pressed at work, and pressed at home. Pressed. Squashed, in fact. She coped by keeping long lists of all the things she needed to do. But most of the things didn't get done, couldn't get done, were, in fact, impossible feats of derring-do for a woman like her, with her life. Darn holes in husband's socks. Reach project target on time. Hoover behind the furniture. Think of witty conversation to entertain younger colleagues. Tidy children's toy cupboard. Go swimming at lunchtime. Get rid of all the herbal tea that is past its sell-by date. Be more efficient. Bake a pie and take it next door to the elderly neighbour. That last one was the worst, the most difficult. Before she had a chance to go round, the neighbour died.

The day after she met Frank the Sticker King of East London, she met him again. She was on her way out of the underground, about twenty minutes late for work, when there he was. She felt compelled to stop. He hadn't noticed her. He was over by the railing, standing absolutely still, staring up into the sky, smiling hugely. His total non-movement was an event, full of drama. Instead of disappearing in the flurry of passers-by, everyone noticed him, at least, she was sure that everyone was taking note of Frank. Most people paused slightly, and looked up, as though hoping to see what he was seeing. But there was nothing up there apart from a clear blue sky which, she supposed, was unusual enough to be a kind of performance in itself, to be observed and absorbed, longingly.

She didn't speak to him then, didn't want to interrupt his road-side reverie. But as she made her way to work she read his stickers: they were multiplying.

'It was Worth It.'

'Mum, I made you Happy.'

'Beach = Pleasure'.

'Live the Day.'

When she got back to the office she stood in front of the window and looked out at the chimney pots and Hawksmoor's spire until her heart stopped pounding. 'Look. It's there, Waiting.'

The week passed, uneventful enough in its time-shredding way. She got through it. She looked for Frank's stickers whenever she could, and always found them.

She worked late on Thursday, phoning home a couple of times to make sure everything was all right. Eventually she finished; she would meet the deadline after all. On the way to the underground station a young woman stepped out in front of her. 'I need help, I want to go home.' Once again, she stopped, when normally she never stopped for anyone or anything. The young woman was very thin and her clothes were cheap and fashionable — a white shag-pile gilet, white boots with pointed toes, black jeans. She had bad skin and lank hair and did not look healthy. 'I've had an argument with my fella, I can't get home, I came out without my purse.' She kept pushing an open notebook and pen forward. 'Let me take your address. I'll send you the money. I promise, I've had an argument with my fella and I just want to go home.' The girl spoke very quickly, as though she knew she had only seconds to make her plea convincing.

But she believed her. She didn't know why. She had got very used to not believing anybody, anything. She didn't believe what she read in the

newspapers. She didn't believe what she saw on tv. She didn't even believe what she could see with her own eyes, there in the flesh — was that real? We live, she was fond of telling herself, in the Misinformation Age. Truth is the most elusive thing.

Not according to Frank the Sticker King. Just that morning she had seen: 'The Truth is obvious. Believe Me.'

'Where do you live?' she asked the thin young woman in the white shag-pile gilet.

'Tunbridge Wells. The train fare is £12.50.'

She took out her wallet, more amazed at herself with each passing moment. She got out a twenty pound note, looked at it, looked at the girl, and handed it over. When the notebook and pen was offered once more, she shook her head and walked away. What had happened? She never gave money away on the street, she didn't believe in it. The girl was probably an addict in need of a fix — but maybe not. Maybe she really did want to get home to her mum. Who cares? I don't care, she thought, I really don't care. I'm allowed to give my money away.

The next day as she walked through the market a breeze came up; the ladies bras filled with air and flapped like wind-socks, the slips billowed like hot air balloons on the rise. The stall-holder batted his merchandise down, attempting to catch it before it flew away. She looked around for one of Frank's stickers; there it was on the wall on the far side of the street.

'Ask me, I'm Free.'

As she read, a man stepped in front of her. He was wearing a fluorescent jacket and carrying a bucket of dirty water and a scraper; he set to work on the sticker. She looked down the street and saw that all the paving slabs, the railings, the walls, had been swabbed clean. Dismayed, she turned back to the cleaner, ready to object. But he was gone.

She turned round again and, there, behind the ladies' slips, was Frank. He smiled at her, a smile of great benevolence despite his missing teeth. Then he waved good-bye, and set off down the street.

FIRST PUBLISHED ONLINE BY PULP.NET at

<http://www.pulp.net/fiction/stories/03/the-sticker-king.html>

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