

LIKE WITCHCRAFT

by Sandor W Lau

Derek is friendly. That's the first thing I notice about him. Derek lurks in front of his house weekday afternoons and all weekend, waiting to unleash his friendliness on unsuspecting passersby. He waves to everyone who passes in a car. They usually wave back because anyone who has driven down our street knows him and knows how friendly he is.

Derek is crazy. That's the second thing I notice about him when I move into the house across the street. If you let him, he will tell you about his flat tyre on his "classic" – that's his bike – 15 times with the same vigour and enthusiasm. He doesn't distinguish much between people, and will just as well tell his story to you or the next person or the president or a telephone pole.

I should try to understand him. Derek has more difficulties than I have. His head is shaved and his skin looks about 20 years older than the body that carries it. He's as garrulous as a whole knitting circle, but his voice is slurred with more than a New England accent. I don't know what disease afflicts him that makes him friendly and crazy, or which caused which.

When I come to the neighbourhood, I meet Derek first. I come to look at a place and Derek is in front of his house waiting. He asks me if I've seen his cat. I notice he is friendly. And crazy.

Other people are contagious. I don't know if there's a psychological word for this, but the people you spend your time with rub off on you. Keeping company with happy souls softens even the most dedicated misanthropes. Hanging out with people who don't get laid seriously increases your chances of also not getting laid. Spending time with witches – makes you a witch. That's what they said in Salem 400 years ago.

This "contagious personality" theory is why Derek talks to everyone, but no one talks back. From the safety of their cars, they wave and smile, but virtually no one in the neighbourhood actually has a second conversation with Derek. Because lunacy is contagious. Like witchcraft.

Sometimes I talked to him for short snippets of the afternoon when I first moved in. There is no way to end a conversation with Derek except to walk away, because "I have to go now" is a mental trigger for him to keep talking just as crazy as before. Walking away from another talking human being feels cruel.

My afternoon walking-away-from-Derek guilt pangs are easily forgotten in the morning. Every weekday at 8.00, Derek takes his usual place in the street and ritually screams, "Come on Steve, come on, come on, come on, come on. Where's my bus? I'm gonna be late for work. It's 9.30 already." Steve is his bus driver. Steve always comes on time. After Derek has screamed for an hour.

At first, I lean out my window and ask him ever so kindly to be quiet, trying to illustrate the lack of correlation between his screaming and Steve's bus. Backfire. With someone acknowledging his pleading, he continues voicing his concerns, all the more vehemently, directly at me. After I ask the second time, with less patience, he finds the gap in my logic, "You don't even know Steve." He's right, of course.

There are few civilians who want to hear screaming of any kind at that hour of the morning, but Derek's screaming causes much more anxiety than simple noise. That's because it is 100 percent genuine stark-raving lunacy. "Hey, did you see my cat? Hey, did you see that smashed up truck down there? It's all smashed up. Did you see it? That guy gave me a pear. My classic got a flat tyre, see? Pretty girls. Pretty girls. Come on Steve, come on, come on, come on, come on." He can't tell a hawk from a handsaw no matter which way the wind's blowing. It's contagious. And it's driving me mad.

So mad that a few times I lose my temper and scream for him to shut the f--- up. This backfires even harder than my kinder requests. He duplicates my screams and threatens to call the cops before returning to, "Come on Steve, come on, come on, come on, come on. Where the f---'s my bus?" with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. Act in anger and anger will be returned unto you.

The last time I scream for Derek to shut the f--- up, the neighbours scream for me to shut the f--- up. My screams plus Derek's reinforced howling are far worse than the original situation. Other neighbours warn me that they have long ago given up on screaming at him.

I have now accepted the fact that I cannot change the situation without doing more harm than good, so every morning at 8.00, I just stick my head out my window and scream, "Come on Steve, come on, come on, come on, come on. Where's Derek's bus? He's driving me insane."

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