

Tales of the City

John Walsh



'Don't take a policewoman prisoner then say you've been called a rude name'

I've been pondering the case of Mr Glen Francis, who is to complain to the European Court of Human Rights about the way he was treated by police. All he'd done was fling a bowl of pasta at a policewoman, take her prisoner and threaten to shoot her. When more police arrived he attacked them with a knife, locked himself in the kitchen, and yelled, "The first copper in here is getting killed!" He was Taser-gunned five times, and complained about it; but he also complained that one of the arresting officers had called him a rude name. Either that or said, "Your behaviour is a social affront."

You can imagine how a quivering violet such as Mr Francis might have his delicate feelings upset by the cop's language – and the Northumbria Police Professional Standards Department took his side. The officer, found guilty of misconduct, has been sent on a management advice course.

Ridiculous, of course – but it's part of the growing multitude of people who, on the most fatuous evidence, have cast themselves as victims. A chap on *Panorama: The Trauma Industry* explained that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was now at epidemic proportions, as people only vaguely connected with disaster now claim they've been traumatised. Once it was the chap who lost his leg on

the crashing train who suffered PTSD. Soon, it'll be anyone who witnessed the crash scenes on television and was upset by them.

So one shakes one's head and thinks: how feeble people are to embrace their "victim status" like that. But what if you discover your own capacity to turn into Glen Francis when it suits you?

Last Saturday afternoon I was driving in south London, turning into a long, slow hill. I was behind a bus and a cyclist. The bus glided left to a fare stop, and the cyclist moved past the bus, dead in front of me. Ahead, the road was clear; there was a wide gap between the bike and the coming traffic – so I snuck round the cyclist and put my foot down. Instantly the air was rent with a savage shrieking along the lines of: "...the FUCK you think you're doing, you tryna KILL me, you stupid FUCK, you tryna SQUASH me to DEFF..."

It went on for 20 seconds. I looked in the rear-view mirror. The bus passengers and passers-by were gazing at the lady cyclist with frank admiration, as though watching a professional rapper. Also in the mirror was a police car, which told me to pull over. There followed a dressing-down about how I'd been taking "insufficient care". I should have sat quietly and nodded acquiescence. Instead, I complained: I hadn't, I said, hit

the bloody woman. I'd been going at 5mph, maximum. She was making a fuss about nothing – "and besides, officer," I heard myself say, "Why'd she have to scream at me like that? It's completely unnecessary. Look, my hands are shaking." To my considerable surprise, I'd turned myself into a victim there and then. I'd discovered an awful modern impulse in myself to say, "Her? But what about me?"

The cops drove off, slightly disgusted. I restarted the car and, half a mile later, found the cyclist on my left. I rolled down the window to call out: "Sorry about that." Was she weeping? Was she still hysterical? She darted a wide, and completely fake, smile of triumph at me – the smile of someone who knows exactly how to use the proximity of a police car to chastise a selfish male motorist...

David Cameron is off to France this weekend, taking *The Scarpetta Factor* by the American thriller writer Patricia Cornwell. "I always start when I go on holiday with a really trashy novel," he told *The Andrew Marr Show*. "You need something to completely empty your mind." I'm not sure this backhanded compliment will delight Cornwell. Her tales of the forensic pathologist Kay Scarpetta are considered rather sophisticated analyses of the barmy and the barking.



She is also skilled at controversial argument: her investigation into the real-life Jack the Ripper case raised the probability that it was the artist Walter Sickert who dunnit in the 1880s. A straight-talking lesbian, she recently told the Florida press, "I know what it feels like to be criticised, attacked and judged."

I think Mr Cameron might consider being more complimentary. Unless he wants to find a character oddly similar to himself splayed out, naked and flayed, on a mortuary slab in her next novel.



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