

Losing Control

MATT HILL

I cursed into my A to Z as the tube rattled into sunlight. A Central London police lockdown meant I'd missed my coach back to Bradford. Now I was forced to hitch home. I had to get to Scratchwood Services from Edgware Station, but it was off the map.

The station exit was choked with groups of rowdy teens. Probably just joshing about before a night out, but my guts tightened. I pocketed the map and strode past them, looking ahead as if I knew where I was going.

Away from the crowds a young man with spiky hair and a tweed jacket was locking up a library.

'Excuse me, can I walk to Scratchwood Services from here?'

He turned and narrowed his eyes. I took in his CND and, 'Nuclear power? No thanks!' lapel badges.

'Hitching, eh? Good fucking luck! Go left at the roundabout, right at the dual carriageway then left through the park. Ignore the winos, keep going under the railway and the M1, left on the road by the scrapyard and you'll be there. Simple.'

I tried to take in his instructions as he inspected me.

'Been on the march?'

'Yeah, police have blocked off the roads.'

'Fucking filth! What was it like? These bastards wouldn't give me the fucking day off.' He jerked his head at the library building as if his oppressors were still inside.

I tried to lighten his mood. 'It was cool, loads of people.'

'Perhaps the Tory bastards will see sense, but I fucking doubt it,' he said and turned away.

I left the foulmouthed librarian, anxious about the park drunks and not sure I could remember the way past them. The sky darkened as I wandered alongside the dual carriageway. The park trees further blotted the light. I heard murmuring, spotted the pitch-black arch under the motorway and ran for it. Heart pounding I emerged to deep barking behind corrugated iron and pushed on toward Scratchwood's tall lights.

The services were busy, plenty of people and coaches, but none was mine. On the slip road there were no other hitchers for competition. Shielded from darkness by the motorway lights I was feeling good. I stuck my thumb out, smiled and made eye contact with every driver leaving the services.

After five minutes two beautiful women in a Mini smiled and stopped about fifty yards past me. It felt too good to be true. I ran towards them and made it level with the car door before they sped off waving and laughing. No one stopped for the next hour. The whole sky inked black as I waited. A couple of drivers veered away as if I would leap into their moving cars. At last a sleek saloon pulled up, an electric window slid down, and the driver said,

'Where are you headed?'

'Bradford.'

'I can drop you on the M62. You should be able to get a lift to Bradford from there.'

'Great!' I said and opened the passenger door. Sliding onto the leather seat I was enveloped in acrid grey smoke. My hitch drew on a slim cigar, accelerated hard and grinned at me as I took in my surroundings. His shiny double-breasted jacket covered a pale blue t-shirt and gold flashed from his hands and neck. I tried to ignore this and played a complimentary opening.

'This is the plushiest ride I've ever had.'

'BMW 735i with all the options. 155mph fuel injected leather and walnut clad top speed.'

'Cool,' I lied, 'are you going far?'

'Yep, back to Selby tonight. Two hours non-stop if you can keep me awake.'

You lose control when hitching. London to Selby takes three and a half hours at the speed limit. Flash Harry was probably going to cruise at around a hundred and was tired. My philosophy was

that the chances of a crash during any hitch were slim; if they were alive to pick me up, they'd probably be alive to set me down.

'Sounds like a good deal, especially after the day I've had.'

'Tell me about it.'

That was the start of the contract. He gave me a lift and in return I would talk to him about whatever he wanted. I told him about missing the coach, the swearsy librarian and getting spooked in the park. He smoked, smiled and kept the car in the fast lane, flashing anyone in his way from twenty feet behind. While I was speaking he leaned over and scrabbled in the glove compartment for a new cigar then lit it with the stub of the old. All accomplished while weaving just within the fast lane. I was transfixed and stopped talking. My hitch exhaled a lungful of wet smoke and stared back at me.

'Go on then. What was the march like?'

'There must have been a million there. I reckon we're going to stop it.'

'No chance!'

'What do you mean?'

'Right, so even if there were a million on the march that means there were 55 million who don't give a toss. Your march won't even skim my mates' consciousness. We're all living in our own little bubbles. I bet yours makes you feel as safe as mine makes me.'

'What do you mean?' I said, 'I get challenged at uni. I've changed loads because of it.'

'Ah,' he raised an eyebrow and smiled, 'but you're meeting tonnes of new people at uni. Loads of them very different from you. Where are you from?' he said.

'Great Yarmouth.'

'I knew it!' he blared the horn at a fast lane hogger who had forced him to drop to 80.

'You probably met your first northerners at Bradford, eh? First gays, lesbians, vegetarians, black people, Jewish people, Pakistani people? In the first couple of weeks you were bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, getting friendly with everyone you met. Then you started to select those to spend most time with, those you felt comfortable with. I think I must meet a dozen new people a year, tops, in my regular work and social life. Most of them are almost mirror images of me or the wife. That's why I pick up hitchers. I want to

find out what you people think. I need to be challenged, shown alternatives to my point of view.'

'And to be kept awake!'

'Yeah, yeah; you got me there.' He nodded and smiled.

Hitching involves a power dynamic. You can be kicked out at any point; left on the hard shoulder miles from a junction with vehicles roaring past, or on the pitch-black verge of a deserted trunk road. In either case you're probably stuck for some time, so it generally pays to be pleasant and engaging. Sometimes though, you're picked up by someone desperate for an argument, someone who wants to test you. This guy had sought me out for a difference of opinion, so I was starting to feel I could open up. After a pause he resumed.

'So, come on then, educate me! If there's going to be a poll tax, why should I protest against it?'

He was driving so fast the motorway lights made his profile flicker.

'Because it's unfair! Everyone paying the same when some can afford more. Those that can't afford it are less likely to be Tories and won't register to vote. The bloody Tories are gerrymandering the whole bloody country! They're not moving the constituency boundaries; they're disenfranchising a whole section of society! They'll force out the poor and leave the electoral roll stuffed with Tory voters.'

My hitch took a long, slow pull on his cigar while he contemplated my outburst, then responded, locking eyes with me and only glancing at the road ahead when he took a breath.

'The American revolutionaries said, "No taxation without representation", but I reckon that cuts both ways. How about we have no representation without taxation? With just the same say as the poorest in how our taxes are spent, those who are richer deserve to pay the same taxes as poorer people. The rich don't use up more public money. They're probably using less by going to private schools and doctors. Why should they pay more?'

'Because they can!'

'I guess from that you're not rich?'

'Yeah, so?'

'So, it's easy to ask for others to pay more, as long as you don't need to.' Cigar ash fell with the jab of his finger on 'you'.

‘You’re right, I don’t have much personally at stake, but what about the weakest in society, who’s going to speak up for them?’

‘Ah, you’re the knight on a white charger now? Have you asked them, the weakest, what they want?’

‘They were out there with us today! Unemployed, kids, elderly.’

My hitch shook his head, ‘Not the majority, I’ve already told you.’

‘Because most are probably like my mum and dad. They can’t afford to take time off working in the service sector. Jobs that are needed on a weekend.’

‘OK, OK,’ my hitch shook his head and smiled, ‘so not all anti-poll taxers marched today.’

I waited in silence for the next round, pressed my right foot hard into the passenger footwell when a slower car drifted towards the fast lane. My hitch blasted the trespasser back to the middle lane with horn and full beam. He hadn’t lifted a millimetre from the accelerator. Then he said,

‘How were the police today?’

‘They were mostly grim faced. A few had the carnival spirit, but I heard there was a bit of violence.’

‘You heard?’

‘Yeah, I was having coffee with a woman I met on the march while it happened.’

‘Ah! The arousal of conflict.’ My hitch leered over.

‘It was only a coffee!’

‘Did you get her number?’

‘Yeah, she’s called Marie, but she’s at Warwick Uni, miles from Bradford.’

‘Only an hour or so by car or hitching. That’s a result! Kindred spirits meeting on a march, I bet the mood around you was good too.’

‘Yeah, the best at any march I’ve been on. It felt like normal people were out against the system.’

‘How did the police cope with the different type of marchers?’

‘They didn’t like our singing!’

‘What singing?’

‘The bonfire song, you know? It’s to the tune of “Oh my darling Clementine”?’

‘No, not heard it.’

‘Build a bonfire, build a bonfire, put the Tories on the top, put the po-lice in the middle and burn the fucking lot!’

‘Charming! I know the police pretty well. They’re just normal people, trying to look after their families. Trying not to get murdered. You know about Keith Blakelock?’

‘What, the Tottenham riots guy?’

‘Yeah, he was killed by the mob when he was trying to protect firemen. That was less than five years ago. That imagery in your song, fire and death from mob violence, I bet that chills the bones of any copper, especially any that had been at Broadwater Farm. A mob of thousands, grinning and chanting murder in your face, no wonder they were grim faced.’

I tried to put myself in police boots; considered how we would have looked, outnumbering them, shouting, singing for their demise.

‘You reckon they were scared of us?’

‘They wouldn’t know what might turn a crowd into a mob. Would you?’

‘We were just people.’

Another pause. We slowed to the speed limit, and my hitch nodded to the police car parked up by the hard shoulder.

‘There they are, keeping us safe.’

‘How come you’re such big mates with the filth then? Are you a copper?’

‘I got to know them pretty well during the Miners’ Strike.’

‘The Miners’ Strike? Were you a flying picket?’

He smiled over at me and his warm grey breath enveloped my face.

‘Sorry to shatter your illusions. I was a scab.’

He searched for a reaction. I turned away.

‘Traitor.’

‘What did you say?’

I repeated the insult. My shoulder slammed into the seatbelt as we sliced across onto the hard shoulder and skidded to a halt. Almost before we had stopped he turned and laid into me.

‘I wasn’t the traitor! It was bloody Scargill! I could see we were a dying industry, any fool could. Government subsidy needed just to stay afloat, mines closing down everywhere. It was purely economic.’

Then Thatcher turned it into class war, and Scargill led us out. He was proudly at the head of the miners, but he had no mandate. He never took a national ballot. It was undemocratic and bloody hard.'

Then he leaned across me and pushed the passenger door open. With his face so close to mine I felt flecks of spittle as he shouted,

'So, if you want to continue with the ignorant soundbites you can get out!'

Lights flashed and horns doppler-blared as lorries and cars sped past us anchored on the hard shoulder. I felt his rage and thought about getting out, but he was a real find. I'd been picked up by a piece of walking history. I'd seen and heard about the miners' strike when I was at school, but it had little impact in Yarmouth. When I got to uni though, my hitch was right, I had met my first northerners. Everyone who talked about the strike was full of the camaraderie it brought out in the strikers, and the hatred everyone had for the scabs. Here was a golden opportunity to find out about the strike from the other side.

I pulled the door shut and said, 'Sorry. I've been stupid. I don't want to get out. I want you to tell me about the strike. What do you mean it was hard?'

My hitch leant back into his seat and started to pull away.

'Now you listen up and don't forget this. I had a young family, new home, mortgage. Nice place. Mining was good money; hard work, but good money. Even before the strike I was worried about the future. I was casting about for a new opportunity that paid as much. My mortgage payments had been high, but they spiked during the strike. I couldn't afford to lose my wage, my family home, so I became a scab. There hadn't been a strike ballot, so I felt I was in the right. Others didn't see it that way. I got death threats, abuse, spat at in the street. The police protected me and my family.

'There was violence on both sides, but only from a minority. I had some good mates I gave money to when they were on their arses, striking. They didn't let on, the mob still thought I was a monster. I thought they were all idiots for following Scargill when there was no strike ballot, but I still felt their pain.

'So the strike ends, along the line we lose our jobs. We're all sitting on a bit of redundancy cash, looking for work we know, not just

graft. We want something using our skills, keeping heavy machinery going. There's all this mothballed plant lying around. I got the lads together who I helped out in the strike. We chip in some cash to buy a lorry with a hoist and we're away! London will buy the plant, so we just scoop it up in Yorkshire, then take it down south. We start selling at auctions, then we get to know the buyers and it's mental! So much money for such little work.

'Five years on and I'm a director of my own company trading heavy machinery. I couldn't have done it without my mates. We stayed tight despite the strike. When it comes down to it, we're all after a good life, eh? Work and rewards.'

Suddenly my hitch swerved into a gap between cars in the slow lane. There was nothing ahead in the fast lane, no coppers around, just a lone smoker silhouetted on the bridge handrail as we glided by.

'Why did you do that?'

'Maybe it's superstitious, but I avoid people on motorway bridges.'

'Superstitious?'

'Yeah, from the strike. One scab was in a taxi to work, I bet he was starting to get stressed about facing the hell of the picket line. Anyway, he goes under this bridge and wham! Concrete block through the windscreen kills him instantly. Ever since then I can't drive under folk standing on motorway bridges. There's probably zero risk. It's half a decade ago now, but like I say, it's just superstition.'

'So, there's still an echo from what happened back then.'

'And there will be from what has gone on today. Maybe it'll stop the poll tax, but there has to be some way of paying for schools, roads, bins, libraries, and all the rest the council does.'

We lapsed into silence, so my hitch switched on the radio. We heard the poll tax march had become the poll tax riots. The will of hundreds of thousands of normal people obscured by a violent few. At the A1/M62 junction my hitch pulled over and turned to me.

'Sorry I lost my rag back there. I see red when outsiders dismiss what my family and I went through.'

He held out his hand and said, 'No hard feelings?'

I shook it. 'No, thanks for the lift.'

As my hitch's car blurred into the distance I thought about his

legacy from the miners' strike. Despite success he was still haunted by the killing embodied by that figure on a motorway bridge. I caught myself contemplating the darkness beyond the lights. Then I felt the napkin in my pocket with Marie's number on it, smiled and stuck out my thumb.