

MATTHEW PARRIS

WEDNESDAY 29TH JANUARY 2009

## **A floral shrine and an aspiring publisher made me ashamed of my unkindness**

I was walking along Limehouse Causeway, a narrow street running close to the Thames in East London. It was about half past eight in the morning, I was short of sleep and feeling temporarily annoyed with, oh, nothing in particular — just everything. ... .. [...]

...Then I heard steps behind me, hurrying. I turned round. A small woman, probably thirty-something, with a slightly anxious expression, was trying to catch me up, and almost running. ‘Er, excuse me,’ she said (quite well-spoken), ‘are you Matthew Parris? I can see you’re in a hurry, but could I just have a word with you?’

All the irritation came sweeping back over me. I cannot seem to help this. I’ve had some lovely meetings and conversations with people I’ve never met before but who have recognised me in the street, tube, bus or train, but my immediate response to someone unknown to me tugging my sleeve, as it were, in a public place, is of annoyance at an unsolicited intrusion. I never, ever, snap at anyone and always make myself be polite, but that’s not how I feel, or not for the first few seconds. Probably my irritation showed, and she noticed. Her face fell, and she began to blink nervously, as if losing confidence. I at once felt guilty and asked, hopefully politely, what this was about.

‘We’ve started a small publishing company, I know it’s probably a wrong time to be trying to expand a new business,’ she said, almost apologising to me for her commercial decision, ‘but if you’re a small publisher without a network it’s so very difficult to get the word around when you’ve a good book that you know people would like, if only they saw it.

‘And we’ve got this book — it’s about dogs — I don’t suppose you’re a dog-lover, but really it’s such a good little book, we’re so pleased with it — and I thought... maybe you know a dog-owner, or a journalist who’s a dog-owner... or... well, anyway, I just thought: “I’m sure that’s Mr Parris, and anything’s worth trying, and it can’t hurt to ask...”’ and she handed me a small ochre card:

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‘You could find out more about the book on the internet, if you just had a moment.’

All my crossness had now fled and, taking the card, I said, ‘I’ll try. I’ll look. But as far as dog-owning goes, I don’t think I’m your man. Thanks anyway.’ As I walked on I saw her turn back, and realised she had not even been walking my way.

I was not far now from my own front door. As I fumbled for the keys, and thought of Kane Theodore, and the flowers and cards, and the little book for dog-owners, my eyes began to well with tears I simply could not control. I had to turn away quickly from a passing jogger, open the door and dive inside. Those tears were not for Kane, whom I never knew; or for the touching optimism of someone trying to keep a small publishing company going in 2009, who’s no doubt perfectly capable of looking after herself.

They were tears of self-reproach and — admit it — of shame. Shame not for my behaviour, which is usually fair, but for my feelings, which are spasmodically unfair and unkind. We are sometimes offered a reminder of what we could become, or are becoming, or might become. These unexpected glimpses can be quite a shock.

Anyway, I followed a link to the book, *How To Handle Living With Your Dog*. It’s part of a *How To Handle* series: ‘No Nonsense Advice on Puppies, Dogs, Pedigrees, Rescue Dogs, Heinz 57s and their Puppy Classes, Dog Training, Canine Health & Nutrition and Diet & Exercise!’ It’s by Winkie Spiers, published last week....

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