

# **The Word's the Thing**

## **The Tales**

### **Collection 7**

#### **Background**

These are (fictional) stories told to an imaginary researcher. They capture fragments of the lives of each narrator. The 'tales' are being brought together as an imagined account of social research. In the meantime, a selection is offered here to Birmingham's activities to promote wider reading in the city and beyond.

## **The Normal Person's Tale**

I suppose you would describe my life as 'normal'. There's not a lot more to say about it. Is that a bit sad? It sounds worse than I mean it to be. Don't get me wrong I enjoy my life; it's just that nothing extraordinary happens in it so I don't have all that much to say about it.

Now that I've got to thinking about it, I suppose I'd rather say 'average' but I'm not even sure about that once it's out of my mouth. 'Normal' does have a ring of security about it: being one of a crowd, being in line, being the same as I'm expected to be. What would I be if I wasn't 'normal'? I'd be abnormal and that sounds terrible. So maybe 'normal' is the better word after all. I mean 'average' is a bit like normal but means something different doesn't it? It implies that we could all be anything. That there will be people at one extreme or another, and that's fine (i.e. they're not abnormal because of being different) and then there's me in the middle – an average of all the extremes – the one who is at the point of balance. So that sounds good. I'm the one who could be a central reference point against which all sorts of weird and wonderful lifestyles get balanced out. So I can be both 'average' and 'normal'?

Except that 'average' has this other side – being 'only average'. That's where I was at school. Not in the brainy lot who seemed to get half the teacher's attention, nor the naughty lot, who got the other half, leaving not a lot of time for me. I was alright, didn't need much attention but my reports kept saying that I was somewhere that was 'only average' in the subject without telling me what I might do about it. So there was probably nothing I could do. I mean, I couldn't just grow my brain any bigger and I couldn't be naughty if I tried. So I accepted being barely average. It didn't seem such a bad thing to be. You just got on with things, not attracting attention and not getting any. I'm not sure if the teacher knew my name or would even notice if I wasn't there. That's just how it was, even though 'average' still had that tinge of failure about it.

So 'normally average' or 'averagely normal' might do best. Whatever the label, I'll still be the same me in my average sized, average priced house on a normal road in a little new, normal estate on the edge of this pretty average town. I earn a wage that is well above the minimum but you couldn't say was high – so probably close to the national average, or average for round here any anyway. It's a normal job, doing normal things with a set of normal other workers. Each day is just as average as the last, and each week is indistinguishable from the others.

At night I watch what other people watch, or at least what others talk about having watched. I visit my parents. I go shopping on Saturdays and go to church on Sundays. It's not routine – that would sound like I didn't enjoy any of it, that I did it just out of routine (strange that when it's 'in routine'...), just because I had to. I enjoy what I do. It's just normal and average that's all, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. Maybe I sound as if I'm trying to persuade myself but that's not it. I really am ok about being normal. I really am satisfied with being average. Mind you, there are days when you just wish that something unusual would happen.

## **The Dangerous Categoriser's Tale**

Sitting in the same seat, you can always find me there, watching the morning flow of people. A flow that could be classified. Linnaeus would have a field day. Middle-aged women on their way home from early morning cleaning shifts. A white van unloading the same twelve men who always had a strange startled look about them – asylum seekers back from the night shift? Knots of schoolboys and shrieky girls, pushing, too many arms and legs for the number of bodies. The same sets of coffee drinkers, so regular that the assistants often have their drinks halfway to the counter before the person gets there.

From my corner seat, with my tall coffee of the day, I watch the same scene with its infinite small variations from day to day, and wait for him. I have never known his name and regret that in some strange way. I only know that he is the one I have chosen. He is the one who has to die so that the world can be saved. I have made my choice out of all the possible combinations. All the options reduced to this one chosen one. I invented a name for him. James – he looked a James. When I first heard his Irish accent I was tempted to change his name to Seamus, but I wouldn't let myself.

I built up a lifestory for him from the bits of his life that I saw each morning. Briefcase – with a few sheets of paper he made notes on – an office job – no, more than that, a consultancy job – going around helping people, solving all their problems, like he was going to solve mine. Not married, I'd noticed that early on – or at least no rings on his hands – no commitments; personally uncommitted to one special individual, so a general commitment to everyone. There for all, so there for me. Decaff – looked after his health; kept in shape (probably went to a gym once a week); able to shoulder the things life throws at him; able to bounce back, indestructible, so even if he had to die he wouldn't really be dead – he would bounce back, reincarnated into some other form with his spirit staying with me, my constant companion, my friend for life, my only friend, my saviour – and his body changing into some other form for me to start all over with afresh.

The day is approaching, I can feel that. The omens will be right. The constellation of office cleaners, asylum seekers and schoolkids will fall into a particular pattern. I will then follow him up the High Street, to the crossroads. The lights will change just as we get there, a last-minute bus will come through the lights and a gentle nudge is all it will take. Under the wheels of the juggernaut and into a cycle of everlasting karma as just another one of my life-shadows.

Then again, maybe this is just something I'm making up. Some story to make my life seem a bit more interesting. Something to tell you because you asked. We'll never really know will we? Just keep scanning the newspapers in the future, though, just in case.

## **The Dosser's Tale**

It's not as bad as you might think. It's not like the old dosshouse my dad used to tell me about. Not a spike. Not a well-rubbed rope strung across with people sleeping on it, to tumble awake (should that be to fall awake?) in the morning when the rope was released. No communal carbolic baths; no mass spraying and shearing. It's not so bad. It's a bed and a roof, with some security from the early morning drunken young kids who would kick you or worse just for the fun of it. It's a place to lock your few possessions away.

It's not so bad after all. It's a meal at night and a breakfast each day. It's a bath and some fresh clothes every so often. It's books if you like them, or TV. It's someone to talk to; someone to ask.

It's a place to shave; a haircut when needed; it's a chiropodist or a doctor when things get bad. It's plasters for the cuts and ointment for the bruises. It's a bandage for the feet and a new pair of socks. Most of all it's a legal existence; an entry to benefits. An address – if anyone ever wanted to write. A point of contact. A place where people recognise you; where they don't instinctively move away. Where, if you dropped down dead they would be able to identify you – not pass you off as some unknown. It's a gateway to reality, of a kind.

It's not so bad. It's a chair and a table, and believe me that can be a lot after wandering around all day. It's a knife and fork. It's a link back to manners and civility, even if a rough enough link at times. It's paint and wallpaper and carpets – and, just occasionally, flowers. It's smiles if you're careful and keep yourself to yourself. It's not so bad.

It's heating in winter; blankets at night. It's a mattress not a doorway. It's a pillow, not a stuffed-up binbag. It's acknowledgement not fear. It's company (of sorts). For a good part of my life this has been home. A safe haven from the skirmishes of everyday life. For a fair part of my life it's been a shell to climb in to, but even a hermit like me can't carry it everywhere with me all the time. There are times when even I have to leave it behind; to abandon it. Times when I need to be free of its strictures and structures. Times when I need to be more of my own person than any hostel can allow.

I take off. I branch out. I take a couple of poetry books from the local library. (Of course I'm allowed in there, I have an address don't I). Poetry to fill my head and my soul. I wander the parks reading, reciting. I spend the days analysing, articulating. I stroll as lonely as ..... until the month is up and the books are due back. They always go back on time. No fines; no dues; no owing anything to anyone. No rule-breaking; no troubling anyone; no troubles for me.

So it's not so bad as you might think, going back to the hostel to recharge from time to time – storing up what is needed for a life full of poetry.

## **The Scream-hearer's Tale**

There's this charcoal-grey cardigan. When I pull the sleeves down they cover nearly all my hands and when I put these hands to my ears to block out the screaming, the wool gives just an extra bit of soundproofing.

The screams? They're in my head and in the room upstairs. How can it be both at once? They must just be in my head because when I creep upstairs and push open my parents' bedroom door with my foot the room is absolutely quiet and absolutely empty.

The furniture all went weeks ago. I don't want it in the house. I didn't want anything that reminded me of them. I even painted the walls and had a new carpet put down. A new, pristine room. A new start – except that the screams are still there, in the room, in my head.

Downstairs I feel better. The photos have all gone. Their books all bagged off to the second-hand shop on the high street. The curtains changed to ones I like. The ornaments all replaced with things that were me not them. I had put up with them for twenty years and now I was free, except for the screams. Maybe that's the cost I'll have to bear. Maybe that's my price, paid for the space and time I now have. Screams in my head to balance off the screams into my face. Twenty years of them screaming, shouting, calling me names, to be offset against another possible twenty years of screaming still echoing on inside my skull? Or maybe it will all soon go away and I'll be left on my own in silence.

One of the really weird problems is that, in a way, I miss it all. I don't know how to live without the barrage, without the spittle, without the florid faces. I don't miss it, in that I want it back. The quietness is a relief. It's just that it's all I've known. It's been my environment: The angry ambience that I swam in all my life. It was just there and now it's not there I fill the silence with imagined shoutings – the screaming in my head. It's all I know and all I have.

Their bedroom is the focus for the noise. That space behind well-closed doors was the epicentre of that last violent outburst. The vortex of all the accumulated anger, burning back and forth between them on that dark rainy night. Emotional ping-pong. Each shot well aimed, using the other's spin back against them, the anger amplifying at every turn. Building, building. Louder and louder. My hands now well over my ears, cardigan sleeves pulled well down as additional padding, trying to keep the noise out but knowing that sounds like that will get round any barrier.

The anger exploded that night in a way it had never done before. Furniture moving; things being thrown; strange noises amongst the shrieks and swearing – and then a total and blanketing silence. I didn't go up until the next day. The silence petrified me more than the shouting.

Once the police had removed the bodies I set about stripping the memories from rooms, throwing out the past, creating my own space. The years will pass and the screaming will diminish. I know that and I can wait.

## **The Blank-time Man's Tale**

It had to come to this point, finally, I suppose but that doesn't make it any easier to stomach. It's a huge step, signing my life over to someone else. All real power of decision-making will go to my son and on the surface that all seems a positive, acceptable step to make. I don't have any fears that life will suddenly change. He isn't going to abuse his new powers. He is going to take it all extremely seriously. That's his nature after all. He's a good lad, so there are no worries there.

What is at stake, however, is the fact that I will not legally have any control. I will be reliant on others. However good a lad he is I am not sure that I want to be so dependant on someone else. Nor is it right, maybe, to put him under all the pressure. He's kind and thoughtful but he has never had to take responsibility. It may prove all to be too much for him.

It started six months ago. Everything would be going along as normal and then I would, for no reason that I could see, find myself in a place I didn't recognise or talking to someone I didn't know (and didn't remember starting a conversation with). They weren't long periods of amnesia, or some slow onset of dementia. They were holes in my life. The nearest description doctors came up with was short-lived blackouts, no help to me though really just coming up with words that described rather than words that explained.

The blank times were not very often at first but then got more and more often. If they were truly 'blank' there wouldn't be an issue. If there were periods where time had stopped still and all action had frozen then there would be nothing to worry about. But during the blank times life went on. Time passed, I did things. I carried on with a life that I hadn't planned and didn't remember. When the blanks were one or two minutes then this just meant that bits of a bus journey disappeared almost unnoticed; or I arrived at the supermarket till with a couple of unremembered items in my basket.

When the blanks reached two hours then things got serious. I would come round (if that is the right term) with a bloody nose and a bruised fist; I would be on a train and not know why or where it was going (but strangely, always had a ticket). I woke up (if that is a better phrase) in a woman's bed. I came round walking along the road out of town. I would be in a pub with groups I didn't know. I was at home having withdrawn most of the money from my account. It couldn't go on. I couldn't be trusted. The solicitor was kind and reassuring. At the end of the day it came to the logical conclusion that I had to be protected from myself.

## **The Tale of the Man who may have met God**

I can't make up my mind whether I met God today or not. I was on this rattly diesel train ('all stops to....'; that sort), reading, and noticed this bloke on the platform as we slid to a stop at one of those open-platform/no-staff stations that seem to be the norm now. (In my childhood days this station would have had a ticketman who acted as a porter if needed, and a stationmaster, and a waiting room with a coal fire. What do you get now? Windswept length of concrete with a bus shelter thing, with or without glass – depending on the local vandals, buy your ticket on the train from a friendly enough person who can't decide between being a guard and being some kind of bus-ticket conductor).

Anyway, this bloke. I noticed him because he was odd. Army greatcoat; hair in a ponytail (for girls that, so why does someone well over sixty think it suits?); grey beard twisted into bits held together by rubber bands. Luckily he chose to sit in front of me not next to me and seemed harmless enough. Until the baby cried, that is. Well – we couldn't actually see a baby. There was a buggy/pushchair thing right at the other end of the carriage so it must have been in there and been crying to itself. Instead of filling the carriage the noise must have been conducted along the shape of the roof and sounded, really sounded, as if it was just behind me.

That's when the bloke turned round; to look at the baby; and was as surprised as me when there was no squawking child there.

'That's always happening to me', he said. 'I act as a kind of magnet to sound. It comes in an arc and then gets focussed to a spot somewhere near me. It's always happening. I don't know why. Probably something to do with my healing aura or something. It's always a sign to me that I'm on a higher level of awareness, and I would be today. Lourdes Day. Day of Healing. There are certain times, certain days when my abilities get magnified. Today's one.'

I had him down as an utter crank by now. Pleasant and harmless but barmy. Yet when I looked at his lined face, his eyes, it was like one of those caricatures of Father Christmas – the essence of the kindly old man who radiates goodness. It was strange.

By the time we reached the end of the line he had told me about people he had cured, how animals were calm around him, how many times he conversed with angels ('just everyday people like me. You see them on trains or in shops.'). how we were all here to fulfil a wider destiny, and how cross he got when God was represented as an old man ('it's more of a coalescence; a sense of belonging to a unity – so heaven knows why religious people find things to disagree about. If they were religious they would understand the unity of all things. It's only because they are distracted by secular procedures that they see things as different.'). When we got off he went down the subway and I went out through the barrier. I still can't decide. He seemed really genuinely 'ultimately good' – but, then again, maybe he was just cranky.



## **The Veil Wearer's Tale**

I wear the veil because I want to. Some of my friends still don't understand that this is just something I choose to do. They choose fashion, I choose tradition. They choose colours, I choose black. They show off their shapes, I keep mine to myself. They get stares and comments, I look out from behind the veil and make my own observations.

None of that makes me a fundamentalist or a terrorist. People see what they want to see. They don't see the earphones and the music player. I could easily be wearing lipstick and they wouldn't know (so there's no need really is there?). Underneath the flowing black I wear what I choose, what I feel comfortable in, rather than worrying about what I want others to see.

Oh, there are looks and judgements. All the time. You can see it in their eyes, which is so ironic since one objection they have is that all they can see of me is my eyes. If they aren't able to read my eyes properly how do they expect to come to any true conclusion. I focus directly on their eyes and read their souls, turning over each wrong opinion of me. Page after page of badly written text laid out across their mind. Maybe I should write an essay on deconstructing texts of the soul as read through the exchange of glances. I wonder what my supervisor would make of that. Not much, I suspect. There are too many set prejudices there as well. She sees text only as film or words or dialogue, not as soul-searching. She sees analysis in terms of sexuality, social roles and the construction of personality not in terms of spirituality. It is not a matter of a clash of cultures, as I keep reminding her. We both live in the same culture. We inhabit the here and now of this place, structured and mediated by politics and the media as well as by global interests. Same culture, but different experiences of it. She doesn't go along with me. How can she? She, whose mental framework is set up to look for constructions of us as separate individuals not as facets of the same underlying cosmic being (Bless his name). Even she, so intellectual in her own way, reads the chapters of my thesis on the role of the veil but does not really know how to feel what I am trying to say.

So each day I put the veil between my thoughts and their thoughts. Each day I walk along confidently, head held high, and listen to their mutterings. I note their glances. I don't judge them for it. It's not my place to say what's right or wrong. That's the misplaced role that fundamentalists of all kinds have taken upon themselves. I am simply in their midst. The object of their beliefs. The target of their views. The subject of their gaze.

It's like a set of inquisitorial barriers, sheepdogging me along paths they each want me to take, whilst I lift my head higher still in order to look above them and keep my eyes on where I want to be. It's back to the eyes again. At the end of the day that is all we have – our ways of seeing.



## **The Plotter's Tale**

I spent most of yesterday staring at the empty page. It was the same the day before and the day before that. In fact it has been ages since I have written anything. It isn't writer's block or anything like that. My mind has been as creative as ever. It is just that caring for a demanding mother and an even more demanding three year old has left little energy for capturing and shaping that creativity.

I know how to write. I used to do it easily. It just flowed. I daydreamed. I plotted. I characterised. I brought people to life in my mind and, just as easily killed them off. Once people know you are a writer they always want to know where your ideas come from. The conversations get more strained. The more you show an interest in what they're saying the more they close up. Probably it is because they secretly want you to include them but are terrified that one of your characters will transparently show up all their little failings?

With me there used to be easy answers. Some of my characters were pure invention and a few drew on features of people I had known. At least I thought it was as easy as that. When I wrote I certainly drew elements from people around me but now there is, just recently, a reverse process building up. I am now starting to transpose my imagined characteristics onto real people near to me.

My calling-out mother is slowly turning into Alice the Evil Witch. Every day she is beginning to look and sound more and more like Alice. Her actions are slowly being intertwined with those of Alice. This has been going on for weeks now, so much so that Alice and Mother have almost become one.

I know now that I have a witch for a mother. I am a witch-child. I can therefore do magic. I can change the world. I can bring people to life and kill them off.

By the same solid logic, Tom – my three year old – is the son of a witch's daughter. He has turned into a devil-child, a force for evil in the world. Every one of his demands has become another blow against the good in people. I don't think the two of them realise that they've changed. They carry on as if nothing is different. They demand and demand and demand, just the same as always.

It all seems different to me though. Maybe I'm the only one able to see what they have really become. It's up to me, I see that now. It's time for the good witch to act. It's time for the white Wicca to start to save the world. I can't rely on anyone else. I'll just have to write it all down on the page that is staring back at me. I'll score it out on the page. I'll delineate the path to salvation. I'll need to keep it to myself of course. People out there aren't ready for my ideas just yet.

Clearly the Wicked Witch and the Son of Evil will have to die – but how? The pages have started to fill. I have started to plot. Again.

## **The Candle-watcher's Tale**

Each night I light a small candle and place it in a jam jar hanging by a string from a branch by my back door. No one else can see it and it burns for less than an hour, but every night I'm there watching it and remembering.

It has symbolism only for me, or rather for a patchwork of fragments that add up to part of me. The crude lamp a reminder of my years underground. A third of my life in a routine of safety checks, mine shafts, stale air, dust, blasting or cutting. Enough coal to fuel the railways, factories and homes of a smog-laden land. Enough dust in my lungs to make it almost impossible to breathe now. I'm not angry about that. I suppose we knew what was happening to us but the money wasn't bad and, above all, there was a communal pride in knowing that the rest of the country relied on our hard graft. So the candle burns in an old miners' lamp.

I wouldn't go to church even if I could make it out the house, and I certainly wouldn't light candles and pray, but this tiny nightlight is a translation of that into something I can manage. A candle, a ritual, a time for remembrance. Army mates who were shot yards from me. Others who were blown up. Any of them could have been me both in the sense that we were interchangeable units and also in the sense that fate or chance pressed a thumb down on their life whilst mine was left spluttering along. So the candle is a remembrance of the nearest thing I had to family.

As an old fashioned socialist I've always been passionate about injustice so there's no avoiding an interest in politics even if my days of rallies and strikes are over. The light is one socialist symbol, alongside the rosy dawn; the tools of manual labour and the red blood-stained banner. Light as a symbol of knowledge and understanding. Light to banish the darkness of prejudice and ideology. Not any feeble, leading, kindly light but the harsh full glare of a searchlight, leaving no room for escape from intellectual penetration. A candle is the best I can do, but it's a good enough substitute for a searchlight. It is a reminder of the old days and a challenge to keep my mind alert to new dangers in this world. It's the spur that keeps me writing letters to newspapers and to politicians. A candle as my own reminder to think about the state of things.

Finally it's a reminder to me, as I turn off the houselights and watch from the darkness, that in too much of the world candles are all there is. Still no clean water, still no proper cooking facilities, still no heating, still no small technological advance in their little world even if the world at large has had two hundred years of industrial progress, has been off to space and back, can power a million neon signs to persuade us to buy stuff we don't need. So, my little candle a nightly reminder of my own wealth relative to the poorest in the world and a brief symbol of injustice everywhere.

## **Tim's Friend's Tale**

Tim, the guy I share a flat with, is really nice. I don't know why he isn't getting the jobs he goes for. We did psychology together at university. I got a job straight away in advertising and marketing. It draws more on my English and my natural creativity but there are times when bits of psychology come in useful. The way to get clients to agree that your daft idea is the best thing they've ever heard. The ability to see how the company team work together (or not). The capacity to stay on the right side of everyone. All useful stuff.

I try to use the same approaches to help Tim see things differently. None of it works on him though, possibly because he did the same course so, like me, he is mentally inoculated against manipulation – or possibly because he's just that bit detached from everything.

He's bright. He always came out with top grades in our group. I know none of us were ultra-brainy, but he was by far the best of our little bunch. He should be able to walk into a job just like that. Instead he goes to the pub a lot. People-watching he says. He walks round a lot during the day. Putting his theories to the test he says. He talks to himself in his bedroom (I haven't enquired too much about that. There are some things it's better not to know too much about .... Too much detail!)

He did start this weird conversation a few months ago, about how many different selves it was possible for one person to hold together and what the mechanism was by which it was done. He was describing to me how they could coexist through some kind of personality treaty-making. Strange stuff, but interesting. That's what he's researching I suppose. It's just good to see that he's keeping his mind alert whilst he's job-hunting. Others would let themselves go, but not him. He holds himself together well.

He also doesn't bother me too much when we meet in the kitchen. We are rarely both in at the same except at weekends and even then there's a routine. I jog across the park and pick up the Sunday papers so that we can both silently rustle our way through them. Occasionally there's a 'Look at this' or 'Did you know that?' Two people reading and living in parallel. Lives that temporarily occupy the same physical space and get along nicely by not disturbing each other too much.

I asked him once if he felt that there were parallels between his theory of personalities-within-a-personality and all the people who live out their lives in parallel in this part of the city. We all do the same sorts of things at the same sorts of times – commuting time, eating time, clubbing time, down-time, up-time, sleep time – but we go about it almost independently of each other, and in some sort of unison. You know what it reminds me of: those huge shoals of tiny fish that all suddenly turn together and swim in a different direction. How do they do that? Like synchronised swimmers on a huge scale. Like flocks of starlings twisting and turning together at dusk. And if we are like that, how do we manage to be in silent contact with each other? Weird really, isn't it, when you think about it?