

It were a wet Wednesday lunchtime, I think. I remember that, cos the telly was on the fizz again, and I were missing Neighbours.

It was always on the fizz, that telly, what with the rain and all, and that indoor aerial what used to work but got a bit bent, and that transmitter at Crystal Palace not being what it was and having problems, our Norman said, pumping the signal all the way out here to the lower Himalayas.

It's cos we're on the wrong side. Of K2, you see. It's not easy to get Neighbours when you've got half a Himalaya between you and Crystal Palace, and only an indoor aerial, that's what Norman said. Then he'd jiggle it a bit, and the picture would be all right for a while.

I do miss Norman.

Twelve Hungry Men

by Nic Ford

So there I was, holding the aerial above my head like the Statue of Liberty, to see if that would do any good, only it didn't, so I were about to give it a whack, the telly, when I heard the bell go in the café. Well, I dropped everything. I mean, it were a Wednesday, and didn't usually get customers on a Wednesday. Or any other day. Fact, we hadn't had a customer since, ooh, 1988. Just after Joe Mangel moved in. With his mum. On Ramsay Street.

It were an old, thin gentleman. Done up strange, he were – long dark coat,

posh shoes. Wispy, white hair.

“Ah! My good woman!” he said, seeing me. “Is this the Shangri-La?”

“That’s right,” I told him. “The Shangri-La Tea Rooms, est. 1963.” I like saying “est. 1963”, it shows we’re not one of those common little Himalayan greasy-spoons down in the foothills. And the full-stop always takes people by surprise, even if it’s a bugger to pronounce.

“Capital,” he said, lowering himself into a chair. “The very place.” I gave the table a wipe for him, nice old man.

Then he cackled. I didn’t like it; it were a bit scary, like he had some mischief planned. Maybe he weren’t a nice old man after all.

“H’what h’will sir be ’avin’?” I asked him in my best voice, the one I save for customers what’s looks like they’ve got something unpleasant under their nose. I think he realised I weren’t taking any nonsense.

“A cup of tea. Hm. Darjeeling, I fancy,” he said. “And a little something to eat?”

“We ’ave some very nice h’Eccles cakes,” I told him, pointing to a plateful on the counter.

“Oh, dear me, no!” the old man said. “Full of currants! It should be like eating some kind of fly pasty, hm? No, I should doubtless dislike them intensely.”

He glowered at me. Rude Old Man, more like. Well, I weren’t having that: I glowered back at him. This went on for almost a minute, until he said:

“A cup of Darjeeling then. Come on, snap snap!”

I went to get his tea.

While I were making the tea – I remember this, cos I remember wanting to see how Madge was coping now Harold had fallen off that cliff, only I were busy making the Rude Old Man’s tea and anyway the telly was on the fizz – I heard this strange raspy, vworping noise outside. I thought nothing of it. Customers we don’t have many of, but strange noises we got a-plenty, being halfway up a Himalaya. It’s usually just yeti playing Twister.

But when I took the tea back into the shop for the Rude Old Man, it weren’t just him anymore. He were talking about something in Hushed Tones – very rude! –

with a funny little individual, all dark hair and piercing eyes and baggy trousers. The new one looked like a tramp, and I were about to shoo him out of the shop when he looked up and saw me.

“Ah, madam,” he said, “so good to see you again. Tell me, do you have any of those excellent Eccles cakes?”

“H’certainly, sir,” I replied. I had no notion where he got the idea we knew each other, but I were obviously wrong about him: it’s nice to have someone treat you with a bit of respect. “And something to drink?”

“Yes, I think so,” the Tramp said. “Assam, please, Mrs Brighthouse.”

“Brighthouse. So that’s the woman’s name, is it?” said the Rude Old Man.

When I got back with his tea – there’d been no improvement with the telly, I’m afraid – well, I were gobsmacked. There was two more of them! A dandy looking fellow with a shock of white hair, and someone who I’m simply going to refer to as ‘Teeth’. I think that’s politest.

Both smiled at me as soon as I came in the room, and the instant I’d put the Tramp’s tea and cake in front of him they jumped in on me.

“My dear Mrs Brighthouse...”

“...how very nice...”

“...a cup of tea, if you would...”

“...Ceylon would be...”

“...a Yorkshire blend perhaps...”

And then, both together: “...and one of your delightful Eccles cakes.”

They glared at each other. I couldn’t tell if they was amused or annoyed; but the Rude Old Man were trying to stifle a smirk, and the Tramp sniggered. The Dandy glared once more at Teeth, then turned to me and flashed a smile. Then Teeth did the same, which were most unnerving.

I don’t hold with shenanigans of any kind, let me tell you, and grown men fighting over Eccles cakes, that’s just strange.

“I’ll fetch you two teas,” I said firmly, marching into the other room. “You can get your own cakes from the counter.”

Course, I peeked back through the keyhole straight away. Teeth and the

Dandy had grabbed a couple of cakes and gone to sit with the other two. Teeth was fishing around in the pockets of his coat for something: a crumpled paper bag, which he shoved under the others' noses.

"Jelly baby, anyone?"

The Dandy swatted the bag away and bit into his cake. Teeth just shrugged, popped a sweet into his mouth, then shoved his own cake in whole. Greedy!

Then it was back to Hushed Tones again. I couldn't make much out: "...terrible situation...", "...the Regeneration Projector...", "...end of the uni..."

All stuff and nonsense, of course. This would never happen in Erinsborough.

Boiling the kettle for the third time, I heard that rasping noise again. This time I had a mind to peek out the window, to see what it was. Well, blow me if it weren't a police box, like that one on the A61 outside Harrogate. Not so common in Bhutan, though.

Stranger still, I noticed, the light on top was flashing in time with that funny vworping. Then the noise and flashing stopped, the door opened and out stepped nothing so much as a beige cricketer, far as I could tell. He looked around, stuck his hands in his pockets, and wandered away whistling.

Still, you see all sorts, don't you? So, I were just about to go have another look at the telly – well, I were having to wait for the kettle, weren't I? – when I noticed the box do a shivery shimmer thing. Then the vworping started up again, and the door opened once more.

This one were the strangest so far: a big, strapping, angry man, he looked, only he had girly hair and was dressed like a clown. I wondered whether I'd booked a clowns' convention and clean forgotten. But then I thought about it, and the Rude Old Man and Teeth, and thought no, loonies' convention more like.

Of course, that weren't the end of it. Six more shivery shimmers, a whole lot more vworping, and six more men coming into the Shangri-La! I saw a diddy little man in a boater hat, and a Victorian gentleman, and one with ears what could give Teeth's teeth a run for their money, and a couple of boys made out of pipe-cleaners with varying amounts of hair and chin... well, I have to admit, it all got too much for me. I had to have a bit of a rest, so I climbed back down and sat in my armchair.

After a few moments of thinking about what was happening, I made a

decision. I got up, found the Emergency Back-Up Kettle at the bottom of the cupboard, and stuck it on to boil beside the main one.

We was probably going to need more tea.

When I got back into the shop, well, I can't tell you what it was like. The twelve of them had helped themselves to my Eccles cakes, thank you very much, and now they were all pointing and jabbering at once. The Tramp was trying to get the Cricketer to listen, the Rude Old Man was muttering away to himself and snapping at anyone who got close enough, and the Clown, if you please, was slamming his fist on one of my nice clean tables, making the cruet jiggle like nobody's business.

Well, I was having none of that. I drew myself up to my full 4'11", and dinged a teaspoon on a cup for all I was worth.

"Gentlemen, please!" I said, in my sternest voice, as soon as I'd got their attention. "This is a h'respectable h'restaurant. Est. 1963, I'll 'ave you h'know!

"Goodness knows," I went on, "we know a bit about parties – one month in 1972 we had three people in on the same day! But this is plain unacceptable."

Then I started to have one of my weeps.

The Victorian Gentleman came straight over, and put his arms around my shoulders. "There, there, Mrs Brighthouse," he said, then turned to his chums. "Doctors, Doctors..." – they was doctors, then, apparently – "Doctors, the good lady is right. This is no way to behave."

"Hear, hear," agreed the Clown. "Now, if you'll all listen to me..."

"Oh, he's off again," sneered the Diddy Little Man. "Love the sound of your own voice, don't you?"

"Don't you start," snapped Teeth. And then all the bickering and shouting kicked off again.

"Doctors, please!" the Victorian Gentleman shouted. "Let's have a little decorum!" Then, as they quietened again: "Mrs Brighthouse, I believe you've brought us some more tea?"

"A... a pot of Assam, and one of Earl Grey," I sniffed.

"That's my girl," said the Gentleman. "And do you have any more of those wonderful Eccles cakes?"

It was a lot more settled, by the time I got back, all of them sitting down sober like. But from the looks on their faces, they wasn't happy. In front of them there was a strange machine projecting odd little shiny animated statues of lots of men and women, like those holograms on bank cards.

I popped the cakes down on one of the tables. The Cricketer turned to me, and beckoned me over.

"Mrs Brighthouse," he said, "what would you do?"

"What h'about?" I enquired.

"The universe," he sighed. "It's facing the biggest threat it ever has. Bigger than anything we, or it, have ever seen before."

The others murmured in agreement.

"It's not just threatened with destruction..." started the Tramp.

"...it's threatened with never having existed," finished Teeth.

"And only one person can stop it happening," said the Diddy Little Man.

"Who?" I asked.

There was a pause, they looked at each other, and then:

"Me!" said the Rude Old Man.

"Me!" said the Dandy.

"Me!" said Teeth and the Cricketer, the Clown and the Victorian Gentleman.

"Me! Me! Me!" said all the others.

"Which one of you?" I asked.

Another pause.

"That's the problem," said the Cricketer. "Not actually one of us at all."

"We've all tried," said the Clown.

"And failed," sighed the Tramp.

"There's one last chance," said the Victorian Gentleman. "One last opportunity to save existence. One more of us to come."

"In fact, my dear," said the Rude Old Man, "one of these." And he pointed to the shiny little statues the machine was projecting.

"We have to choose," said the Cricketer. "Special dispensation from the Time Lords..." (the what? I wondered, but didn't get time to ask) "...to choose our final body. But which one? We just don't know."

Well, I didn't need asking twice, did I? I'm always one for opinions, me. I pushed my spectacles up my nose and peered at the projections.

There was all sorts there: short, tall, thin, fat, men, women, all sorts. But one jumped out immediately.

"Well," I said. "I don't know about saving the universe, and it might take him a while cos he's a bugger for prevaricating, but if you want a hero, someone who can work miracles – like get a telly in the Himalayas to pick up a signal from Crystal Palace – well, that's the one you want."

I pointed at one of the little statues. One of the beardy ones. It was the spit of our Norman.

The rest of the day was spent with the Doctors pointing at Little Norman, and shouting and eating jelly babies and Eccles cakes and drinking cup after cup after cup of my tea. By late afternoon I was exhausted, and fell asleep in the corner.

When I woke up it were nearly time for the afternoon episode of Neighbours. Only, of course, the telly were on the fizz. Like it had been ever since I lost my Norman.

I looked around. The Doctors had all gone, except for the Rude Old Man.

"My dear Mrs Brighthouse," he said. "Thank you so much for looking after us. I cannot tell you how much we, and the universe, have to thank you for."

Well, I blushed. "It was just tea and that," I said.

"Nonsense!" he replied. "We're terribly grateful. I hope you don't mind, we've done a little thing for you in return."

I looked at him blankly.

"Your television receiver," he said. "We noticed it wasn't receiving as well as it might." He smiled. "One of my older selves..." – he must've meant younger, of course – "...knocked up a shelf for the aerial. Using that screwdriver thing, terribly handy. The picture's a little better now."

I ran into the back room and stared. The aerial were just where he said it was, up high on a lovely new shelf, and the telly! Oh, what a picture!

"Goodbye, Mrs Brighthouse," the Rude Old Man said, "I look forward to meeting you again."

I wasn't paying attention, I'm ashamed to admit. I were too enthralled by my telly.

The Old Man made to leave, but then stopped.

"You know," he said tentatively, "I think I may sample one of your Eccles cakes, after all." He picked the last one up from the plate on the counter, poked at it gingerly, and then sank his teeth in.

"Oh yes!" he cried. "Excellent! Excellent! I was entirely wrong, Mrs Brighthouse, entirely wrong!"

He went to leave, still nibbling at his cake. "Mrs Brighthouse," he spluttered through currants and crumbs – and honestly, I still don't know why they all thought that were me name – "your Eccles cakes are delicious! Oh yes, I shall remember these!"

Then the door slammed shut, and he were gone.

To be honest, I didn't really notice. I were a bit distracted, you see - Bouncer had just bitten Jim Robinson on the bum. But later on, I got to thinking about all them Doctors, and how they'd chosen my Norman over all those others, and what a good choice that was.

Cos there was always something special about my Norman. So handsome, he were, with his little goatee beard and his piercing, mischievous grin. And clever, oh yes, so very clever: all sorts of plans he used to make, for world domination and that. So handsome and so clever.

So masterful.

**DOCTOR
WHO**

CLASSIC DOCTORS - BRAND NEW ADVENTURES

**TWELVE
HUNGRY
MEN**



by Nic Ford



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