

Norman's Conquests

On the morning of his forty-first birthday, Norman Saunders was voted the most boring man in Britain. The first he knew of it was when a small posse of tabloid photographers and a cameraman from the local news arrived on his doorstep to witness the presentation of a small, silver trophy depicting a sleeping bear with a number of zeds floating from its mouth. Alongside, his wife and daughter stood yawning and rolling their eyes theatrically.

When Norman confessed ignorance of the award, one of the grey-coated snappers turned on a portable radio he was carrying and the assembled throng was silent as Norman's success was announced to the listening millions. To be named the nation's biggest dullard he had, apparently fought off stiff competition from six thousand others. "Norman," said the disc jockey Prince Vince, "stood head and shoulders above the rest of the field."

At this Norman's wife and daughter sniggered conspiratorially, their volume increasing as his prize-winning attributes were read out by Prince Vince, a man who co-presented his weekend breakfast show on Radio One with a mechanical dog.

"Among his hobbies, Norman lists stamp collecting and hill walking," he began to the sound of canned laughter. "He plays postal chess with a man in the Soviet Union and their latest game has been on for two years" – a jingle of people shouting 'No, really?' and 'Boring!' The voice continued its liturgy: "His favourite TV programmes are repeats of The Antiques Road Show and Mastermind" – a howl from the mechanical dog – "And at Christmas he bought his wife Mary a cardigan and his daughter Aisha the complete works of Shakespeare" – hoots from the production office.

Norman winced, oblivious to the continued picture-taking, as the humiliation continued: "Norman works in the British Museum library, but says he can't discuss his work because he's a government servant" – hysteria in the studio with someone shouting 'Mole, mole!' "His favourite bedtime reading is The Stanley Gibbons Catalogue for Norman, Dear Listeners, is a *serious* stamp collector" – cue taped hissing – "And, wait for this one, his idea of a practical joke is to stand behind the front door and should 'boo' when Mary returns from shopping" – dog, man, producer and taped effects into overkill.

At Norman's side, Aisha and Mary were now crying with laughter. Confused, Norman left them to it and sought refuge in the upstairs loo. The Most Boring Man in Britain? What did it mean? Downstairs he could hear the two women giving the assembled press tea and biscuits before sending them on their way: "We're off to Cornwall for a few days and Norman won't come with us because he says sea air gives him headaches. Hasn't he heard of Paracetamol?" Aisha snorted as Mary said affectionately: "Norman is sooooo boring, bless him, but he's got a heart of gold."

The next day, after seeing his wife and daughter onto a train, Norman went to work as usual at the British Museum. To his surprise there was vigorous interest in his indexing system that morning and the level of noise in the room was less a murmur than a buzz. One chap returned with completely inane questions on at least four

occasions, taking whatever intelligence Norman imparted to a group of students who would then turn around, studying him intently before returning to their work.

At lunchtime it was a relief to sit unencumbered inside the main gates. Eating the egg mayonnaise sandwiches he'd prepared for himself before going to bed the previous night, he was suddenly aware of a gaggle of young girls peering through the gates pointing at him. "Oi! Aren't you that Norman?" one of them shouted. Startled, he dropped his sandwich and it fell in two pieces onto the grey flannel of his lap. How did they know his name? He pulled out his handkerchief and dabbed at his clothing. This made the whole group roar: "Oi Mate, what's in your sarnie? Cabbage?" More roaring, and now obscenity: "How d'you give a girl a good time in bed, Darlin', take yer socks orf?" What on earth was wrong with the world?

Norman returned inside and went to tidy himself in the staff toilets. It was only then that the penny finally dropped. An Antipodean anthropologist who'd been pointing Percy at the porcelain after a morning's research in the Egypt section, was delighted to find Norman at the basins. "I say, you certainly put us on the map this morning with all that *boring man* stuff. It gave us all a real laugh though the suits were a bit grim faced about it." From his pocket he pulled out a newspaper cutting which he thrust into Norman's damp hands. "I was going to send it to my Ma to read."

There it was, for the world to see: the Saunders family, father in the foreground uncertainly holding his award while, in the background, wife and daughter grinned broadly. The headline was, *Meet Mr Boring – the Museum Man Who Can Never Relics*. Underneath was the litany of qualifications. To the side of the story, a cartoon called *Life With the Bores* showed a man on a beach, hanky on head, long trousers rolled to his knee, saying: "And as a special treat, I'll take the windbreak down for half an hour." Underneath was a message to the readers: 'Is someone in your family a real bore? Does he – or she – make Norman Saunders look exciting? Then write and tell us about it...'

The anthropologist was too young or too insensitive to see Norman's discomfort. "Do you really iron your underwear?" he asked pleasantly, "I always remember my amazement at finding mother ironing our sheets – thought she was completely bonkers." He was genuinely nonplussed when the older man went into the adjacent cubicle, threw the cutting into the toilet pan, and, without a word being exchanged, pulled the flush before exiting.

An hour later, leaving his jacket on the back of his chair, Norman left the British Library and went to the nearby university library at Senate House where he read the newspapers of the day. He found himself featured on page 5 of the Sun, 7 of the Daily Mail and 8 of the Daily Mirror and the Daily Express. Even the more serious newspapers had run a few paragraphs though only the Telegraph used a photo. It had been, he surmised, a slow weekend for news. Keen to understand what constituted 'interesting' in the vocabulary of the masses, he spent the afternoon reading gossip columns and magazines.

So it was that that evening after a cup of tea and a baked potato at Cranks, he was to be found in London's West End, checking out the nightlife of the city's bright young things. He started off in search of Stringfellows nightclub which he remembered being mentioned a lot in his own youth, but somehow got caught in a party of

Japanese tourists which turned, in a single instant like a school of piranha, into the entrance of the Hippodrome disco and he found himself in its dark underbelly.

The waitresses in heavy make up and with tutus attached to their knickers swished to the beck and call of travelling salesmen and foreign executives still in their work suits. On video screens above the dance floor images of copulation were interspersed with flashing lights and lurid lettering. Against this background young bank clerks and shelf fillers and catalogue models high on mescaline jerked in the style of the moment. Pressed against the bar by the violence and the volume of the music, Norman ordered a drink he didn't recognize from a laminated card and balked when there was no change from £10. The tropically festooned beverage he had inadvertently ordered was propelled down the bar towards him. Clutching it at chest level, like a crucifix in the face of the devil, Norman headed for some side stairs that promised escape but delivered captivity – a vista of layered banquettes peopled by rouged men and women, one of whom was advancing in his direction.

She was at least six feet tall in her stilettos, wearing a black leather dress with a tightly laced front. "Hello good looking," she rasped at Norman in a deep, throaty way. "I'm Heidi. Don't I know you from somewhere?"

Unable to compute the creature in front of him, Norman shook his head wordlessly. "Are you sure, Lovely Boy," she crooned, "You look so familiar." Again, Norman shook his head. "Then" she said, lowering her tone to a growl and seizing his trembling elbow in her enormous talonned hand, "It's time we did." Turning, she propelled him towards a group of effeminate men. One, in buckled black bondage trousers and a singlet showing off oiled but tiny arm muscles, brushed his hands against Norman's legs, "Grey flannel, just like being back behind the bike sheds with teacher! What's your name? Normal? Norman. Normal Norman and Hollywood Heidi."

An oriental woman, flat with muscular legs under her silk shift, leaned across and ran a finger down the bridge of his nose. "Don't be frightened by them, Petal, they're just silly boys. Tell me, is this your first time?" Norman nodded uncertainly. "Would you rather be left alone?" This time he nodded with conviction. "You're a one to one man aren't you, Norman? Come on guys, let's give Norman and Heidi some space."

Heidi squeezed Norman's legs. He continued clutching his drink as if it contained salvation. She said, "Can you speak?"

Norman swallowed his drink in one before answering. "Yes I can but I'm feeling a little nervous, a little out of place, you see, it's my first time. Here I mean."

The giant woman winked conspiratorially, brushing an imaginary piece of fluff from the laced cleft between voluminous breasts. "So, you're not a complete novice?" She removed Norman's empty glass and covered his hands with hers. "Hell, Lover, are you in for a treat," she growled in what was almost a moan. Then, without any effort at concealment, she put the flat of Norman's left hand against her crotch and curled it around her private parts. Her warm, hard, private parts; hard and erect.

Squealing like a cornered rat Norman snatched his hand away. Like the animated man on the green Exit signs, one arm forward and one behind, he ran down the stairs and out of the building. He didn't stop until he was under the statue of Eros in

Piccadilly Circus, winded and gibbering. Even in his hysterical state he had the presence of mind to check that his wallet and season ticket were safely in his jacket pocket, and as he did so he was approached by two gangly French boys: "Excuse me Monsieur where is the Soho?" His head jerked up and his threatening visage scared them. Foam was leaking from one side of his mouth, still slackened from shock. One of the boys, who had a cousin with epilepsy, registered Norman's state as medical and touched his shoulder, "Are you fitting, Monsieur? Do you needing 'elp?" He literally shrank away as Norman responded with unmitigated fury: "Leave me alone, I'm not like that! Allez! Allez!"

Everyone was looking. Norman checked his watch. Ten already? Where had the time gone? His train home left Waterloo at 45 minutes past the hour. He started to walk, back through Leicester Square, across into Covent Garden and then over Waterloo Bridge with a pit-stop to enjoy the view – St Pauls and the city on one side, the Festival Hall, Parliament and Big Ben on the other. Still feeling wobbly, he pushed on through the late night cinema and restaurant crowds.

Turning the corner at Covent Garden tube station and heading towards the cobbled piazza still loud with buskers, he heard a cry: 'That's him in the dark jacket!' Behind him suddenly the clip of running feet, and he was flat on the floor.

An enormous weight was on his back, shoving his face into the stones. "Gotcher!" a loud voice brayed in his ear. Then the weight lifted and just as suddenly he was hauled upright, his legs kicked apart and his body pressed spread-eagled against the glass front of an up-market stationer. "Where's the bag? Check his clothing." Knees buckling but somehow still upright, Norman tried to quell the shaking while someone patted down his body, hands running up and down his legs. "Has he dropped it somewhere: I would swear she said this was the man."

High-pitched voices indicated the arrival of women. "No, Gordon, that's not him. I told you, he was a nondescript fellow in a plain jacket and trousers." A pause. "Well, it does look a bit like him, I have to say, but he was younger. Let me have a look at his face." Norman was spun around with his right arm in a half Nelson. "Oh no! That's not him. Same sort but the other chap was a bit livelier – cocky – you know? Anyway," – a loud wail – "He hasn't got my evening bag so it can't be him, can't it? Oh Lord, what are we going to do?"

On cue, three policemen came dashing round the corner to find a large crowd of overdressed and overloud opera goers on the way out from *Così fan tutte*, one of whom, a woman in a red velvet evening dress, was the victim of the bag snatcher. They looked at Norman, battered, rather grubby and mute from distress. "What's going on here, then?" The woman's companion, Norman's assailant, identified himself as a retired Major General enjoying a night at the opera with his wife. He was terribly sorry he said, "The chap looked a lot like this man here and he took off at such speed I didn't have time to verify any of his particulars." He was, he said, addressing Norman, very sorry for the mistake. "If you ever need advice on Japanese gilts, I'd be happy to help you for no charge." He turned to offer similar services to the policemen, but they had already lost interest.

The youngest policeman said to Norman: "Don't I know you, Sir?"

Tired, angry, unable to focus from anxiety and pain, Norman replied irritably: “Is there any reason that you should?”

Ten minutes later, the Major General and his crew were on their way home sans evening bag and Norman was in Bow Street Police Station ‘helping police with their inquiries’. “He got stopped on suspicion of mugging, Sarge, but he’s clean.”

“Well what did you bring him in for, Laddie?”

An embarrassed pause, “Well he looks really familiar like, and I thought maybe we ought to run a check on him, just in case. I know his face and he knows I know his face, but he won’t cough.”

“What’s his name?”

“Saunders, Sarge, Norman Saunders.”

“I know that name.” The Sergeant Googled Norman. “He’s Britain’s most boring man!” Soon all the duty officers were at the front desk savoring a celebrity moment. “Your Missis put you up for the award? Phwoar – what did you do to deserve that – steal her bingo cards?” They gave him tea and biscuits, got the police surgeon – who was dealing with a knifing in the cells – to clean his wounds, and took pictures of him on their mobiles before freeing Norman to limp down towards Waterloo Bridge with the promise ringing in his ears that they would email Prince Vince to warn him that lives can be ruined through too much success.

It was half past midnight. He’d missed the last train of the day. He would now have to wait for the first train of a new day. Looking neither left nor right for fear of attracting opprobrium, Norman crossed the Strand onto Waterloo Bridge, yearning for sleep. It was a strangely bright night and he was suddenly aware of a young girl in a skimpy little skirt and top hoisting herself onto the railings. She teetered there, the back of one hand draped dramatically across her forehead like a silent movie heroine, the fingers of the other clutching a lamp standard for support as she gazed bleakly at the water below. He realized she was going to jump.

It could have been Aisha, but that wasn’t what motivated him. It was the sanctity of life, preferably a quiet one. With only a split second in which to make the decision, Norman’s feet found wings. He covered fifty yards in seconds, lunging at the blonde nymphette, wrapping his arms around her legs and pulling her to the ground as she screamed obscenities: “What the fuck, you stupid bastard! What are you playing at wanker? Oh my god, I’ve broken my nails. You stupid fucker!” She bit, she scratched, she screamed, and all the time they wrestled.

Mid-grapple he was aware of two things, the pain in his body and a sudden hush before pandemonium broke loose, shouting and swearing now in crescendo and the bright light of the evening had split into beams playing across the ground, lighting up the little grey man who, in the frenzy, had somehow got an arm lodged up the back of the girl’s thin camisole.

Feet. So many of them. Kicks. He rolled away from them but they still made contact. And then the girl shook free and jumped up. “How did he get through, the bloody pervert! Look what he’s done to my top, it’s covered in shit.” He heard a man’s voice a cajoling, placatory: “It’s all right Magdalena baby, you’re all right.

Don't worry about the clothes. We'll get around it." Then: "Where the fuck was security? I want them here. NOW. And get that bloody wardrobe woman out of the trailer. Who the fuck is this fucker?"

For the second time that night, Norman, now sporting a hate bite on his neck and a three claw graze on his left cheek, was hoiked upright. "What's with you, Dickhead, what are you playing at?" Norman fumbled for his soggy handkerchief, which now stank of sweat and egg, to staunch his wounds. So many people. Where did this nightmare begin? He became aware that the voice barking orders belonged to the tall, longhaired man in a leather jacket who had just arrived, bristling, in front of him. "Do you know what you've just done?" Norman shook his head nervously. "You've just fucked up the latest Magdalena video, that's all. Weeks spent getting clearance to close off the bridge, days spent waiting for a clear night with a clear sky, hours spent setting up and rehearsing and what do you do? You walk straight into fucking shot and then – " His voice rose so it could be heard down the river at Putney. "And then you grab hold of our fucking star who's hanging over three hundred feet of water by her fingernails, and practically fucking rape her – that's what you do! Rape her or kill her: which were you planning?" He shoved Norman so hard it was like a physical explosion within his chest cavity. Norman dabbed at his watering eyes, aware an explanation was due. "I thought I'd saved her," he began limply. "I didn't know..."

The man's face was florid with emotion, "You didn't know? You didn't recognize Magdalena? Where the fuck have you been, Pal, locked up in the British Museum?" A sudden intake of breath, "The British Museum! Jesus Christ, it's you, isn't it? Isn't it you? It is! Saunders of Surbiton, the most boring man in Britain. Saunders!" A secon pause and the voice lifted: "Let's sit down together for a few minutes, Mr Saunders, it may just be that we can turn this disaster into something good."

And that was how, at 1.30am, Norman found himself acting in a pop video with the luscious, pouting, foul-mouthed teenie queen. Magdalena (it'll be like the Sergeant Pepper album cover, but a video, with everyone knowing his face but they can't put a name to it.) Shooting began where it had left off: "That was such powerful action, Norman, it's going to look fantastic when we stitch it all back together. Put your arm a little further up her back, that's right – and bury your head on her chest – just close your eyes and think of England, it's easy. No, not there, a little more to camera left, yep, that's it, and don't wince when she strokes your face."

After the fourth and successful take, Norman was given a shot of vodka. Magdalena, sitting with him on the kerbside, told him the scene would be inserted in the last shots, "As the song reaches crescendo." She crooned sweetly: "Don't pull me back, I'm tired of it all, It's a short way to jump, A long way to fall, It's not you who's lost me Honey, It's me who's lost the will..." She turned to him: "Do you like it?"

Norman sighed into his shot glass, "It's lovely, Magdalena, I may even buy a copy." The momentary silence was like a balm. Shooting was done, the starlet appeased, and Waterloo Station was nearer than ever before. At last he could head home. He turned to make his farewells and found the singer studying him. "So why are you so boring, Norman? I don't read the papers so I don't know what the fuss is about."

His breath came out in a big frosty puff as he sighed a reply, "No, neither do I. Something to do with my stamp collecting and postal chess. All very unpleasant."

“Postal chess? I suppose that’s one way to keep yourself busy but there’s plenty better. Actually, I used to play chess once, I was in the county chess squad, but then I became a star and there’s no room for that sort of thing on the road. They’d all think I was dead boring. Oh. Sorry.”

“That’s the way of things,” Norman said with resignation. His wife and daughter were obviously right, but what could be done now – a leopard doesn’t change its spots after forty years. “It’s a shame though,” he added. “I find it relaxing and absorbing and if you know chess, its sheer complexity is anything but boring.” He looked at his watch. Half past three. He would have to kill time till the milk train at five.

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When Mary and Aisha returned from holiday, the house was in tip-top condition and Norman, as always, had prepared cold meat and salad with homemade ginger beer to welcome them home. They told him he should be more careful when shaving, commented on the fact that he was getting a bit stiff in his old age and regaled him with hilarious stories of seaside landladies, Aisha’s crush on a young sufer called Dele and Mary’s visit to the palmist in Newquay: “She said I was married to a dark horse and should be vigilant!” Both of them roared at this before Mary asked, kindly and with genuine interest, “And what have you been up to?”

Norman looked up from his meal. “Oh, nothing much. I put in some overtime at work, and I’ve seeded the lawn – so don’t walk on it. I went to the Mauritian stamp exhibition – they opened till eight on Thursday evening - and picked up an interesting book on philately in Indian Ocean countries. That’s about it. Oh yes – your aunt phoned, Mary, and wants you to call her over the weekend.”

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A month later, Aisha yelled to her mother while watching MTV: “Hey Mum, come and look at this, there’s a bloke on the new Magdalena video who looks just like dad. Really!” Mary wandered in from the kitchen and was brought short. “Goodness, it really does look like your dad, doesn’t it, the face, the clothes, it really could be your dad. I wonder what he’s been up to, ravishing girls his daughter’s age, the cheeky bugger. Look where he’s got his face, and what is she doing to him?” She started to laugh and Aisha, suddenly relaxing, laughed with her. “I love your dad,” Mary said, “But let’s face it, Darling, he’s never going to change, is he? If only he *were* the man in the video, at least he’d surprise us.”

Norman, hearing the conversation as he entered the room, smiled to himself.

The next morning the postman delivered a handwritten letter in a pink marbled envelope. Norman took it into the bathroom, shut the door, and carefully opened it. Inside was a jolly note: ‘I’m going to annhialate you in this game Norm (did I spell annihialate right?). This week’s move – pawn to Queen’s Bishop 3d. Work that one out if you can my boring friend! Big kisses, Magdalena.