

# PLACID GOSPEL OF A VERY, VERY NICE MAN

YOU'VE seen the advert. You probably belong to the organisation. You may even have the teeshirt.

But what else do you know about that weird advert for the AA, which bills itself as the Fourth Emergency Service?

It's the splendid *Desiderata*, a set of rules for life found inscribed on the side of a wall in Old St Paul's Church, Baltimore, dated 1692. It was clearly written by a very nice man, a very, very nice man...

Go placidly amid the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence. As far as possible without surrender be on good terms with all persons. Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant; they too have their story. Avoid loud and aggressive persons, they are vexations to the spirit. If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain and bitter; for always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself. Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans. Keep interested in your own



career, however humble; it is a real possession in the changing fortunes of time. Exercise caution in your business affairs; for the world is full of trickery. But let this not blind you to what virtues there is; many persons strive for high ideals; an everywhere life is full of heroism. Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection. Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment it is perennial as the grass. Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth. Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. But do not distress yourself with imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness. Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself. You are a child of the universe, no less than the trees and the stars; you

have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be, and whatever your labours and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace with your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. Be careful. Strive to be happy.

**Norman MacCaig, who died last month, should have been Scotland's Poet Laureate. He had a particular eye for 999 drama, as *In Hotel Room 12th Floor*, set in New York.**

I lie in bed between  
a radio and a television set, and hear  
the wildest of warwhoops continually  
ululating through  
the glittering canyons and gulches—  
police cars and ambulances racing  
to the broken bones, the harsh  
screaming  
from coldwater flats, the blood gazed  
on sidewalks.  
The frontier is never

somewhere else. And no stockades  
can keep the midnight out.

**Then there's McCaig's Brooklyn Cop:**

Built like a gorilla but less timid,  
thick-fleshed, steak coloured, with two  
hieroglyphs in his face that mean  
trouble, he walks the side walk and the  
thin tissue over violence. This morning  
when he said "See you, babe" to his wife,  
he hoped it, he truly hoped it.

Who would be him, gorilla with a night-  
stick,

Whose home is a place  
He might, this time, never get back to?  
and who would be who have to be  
his victims?

**And finally, McCaig's moving Visiting  
Hour.**

I will not feel, I will not  
feel, until  
I have to.  
Nurses walk lightly, swiftly  
here and up and down and there,  
their slender waists miraculously  
carrying their burden.

of so much pain, so many deaths,  
their eyes  
still clear after  
so many farewells.

Ward 7. She lies  
in a cave of white forgetfulness.  
A withered hand  
trembles on its stalk. Eyes move  
behind eyelids too heavy  
to raise. Into an arm wasted  
of colour a glass fang is fixed,  
not guzzling but giving.

And between her and me  
distance shrinks till there is none left  
but the distance of pain that neither  
she nor I can cross.

She smiles a little at his  
black figure in her white cave  
who clumsily rises  
in the round swimming waves of a bell  
and dizzily goes off, growing fainter,  
not smaller, leaving behind only  
books that will not be read  
and fruitless fruits.