

# Hunger Strike In Whitehall

November 11, 2021

Day 19. Richard Ratcliffe has gone 19 days without food. Nineteen!

Right now, he is camped outside the Foreign Office, not-eating as a protest against the UK government's consistent failure to get his wife Nazanin home from Iran.

*Hi, I'm John-Paul Flintoff, and this is my newsletter. ::Everyday Writing::*

I had other plans for this month, but I discarded them this morning.

I decided to write instead about my trip to glimpse this brave man whose family has taken the full brunt of Anglo-Iranian diplomatic failure.

I had no great plan: I thought I'd just show up, to add to the numbers of well-wishers. I packed my rucksack with sketchbooks, pens and pencils.

It was Armistice Day, just after 11am, when I arrived.

Like others on the Tube, I'd observed my two minutes of silence. Coming out onto Whitehall I found it packed with people, mostly men, dressed in bowler hats, blazers, kilts (though not all these items together) and an assortment of other ex-military outfits.

I turned down the side road towards the Foreign Office, where a substantial group had gathered around a man with a green knitted hat, whom I recognised from the TV as Richard Ratcliffe.

Probably half the people there represented the media; and about half of the media were from overseas. They took turns stepping before him and asking (presumably) the same questions again and again.

At all times, he kept at his feet a beautiful photograph of his wife in happier times, with sunglasses on the top of her head and a big smile.

The other half of the gathered crowd seemed to consist of well-wishers, like me. Two were VIPs: the leader of the Liberal

Democratic Party, Sir Ed Davey, and a woman whose name I don't know.

They listened to Ratcliffe. He waved his hands expressively. Then they posed together for photos.

One woman in her early 40s had brought two spaniels. I watched her waiting a long time. Eventually one of the TV crews nodded her ahead.

She stepped before Ratcliffe with her dogs. He leaned forward, patted the spaniels, looked up, and smiled. And I realised I've not seen him smile often - for obvious reasons.

Almost as soon as she had arrived, the woman turned away, conscious that Ratcliffe has little time, and little energy. I was sketching as fast as I can, but had time to capture only one dog.

As soon as the woman's back was turned, she burst into tears.

She started walking quickly back towards Whitehall, dragging the dogs behind her. I followed, caught up with her by the arch across the road, and asked what she'd said to him.

"I just... I didn't know what to say," she stammered, tears on her cheeks. "It's just shocking. Six years!"

I asked her name. Julia, she said. Where had she come from? Wimbledon. We said goodbye to each other.

Another well-wisher had brought flowers. These were presented to Ratcliffe's mother, who stood nearby, wearing a kind of long-haired multi-coloured fleece. She asked for the flowers to be added to a (not huge, but not tiny) collection of bouquets assembled behind her son, near the mini statue of Gandhi.

Yet another well-wisher rocked a pram and checked his phone while he waited to speak to Ratcliffe.

When the time came, he turned the pram around so that Ratcliffe could see the baby boy inside it.

I noticed about four tents on the pavement

nearby. I wondered who they were for. One for Ratcliffe, one for his mother, and (I'm totally guessing) one for the medical friend who kept asking how he was doing, and encouraging him to drink from his water bottle.

Behind the tents, the wall was covered in Christmas-tree lights, and candles, and pumpkins, and bunting. A sign indicated that the area is monitored with CCTV.

As I sketched, I overheard journalists chatting about industry stuff. One pair discussed a plan to write a book about something. Occasionally they made phone calls describing the material they had gathered - to a producer, I assume. And every so often individual reporters stopped behaving like normal human beings and raised a mic, eyeballed a particular camera, and started addressing an imaginary viewer.

One who did that was from Iran International TV.

He spoke in Farsi, gestured towards the bulk of the Foreign Office, then did a clever bit of footwork that ended with him seated beside Ratcliffe, to whom he addressed questions (in English).

Afterwards, I asked the Iranian newsman what his name was. He seemed a bit suspicious.

I said I was just a guy doing some drawings, and showed him my wonky sketches. He consented to give me his first name, Tajuden, which he spelled out for me patiently.

I never did get to speak to Ratcliffe, or shake his hand, or wish him luck.

I don't mean to criticise anybody else who did that, but after I'd been there a while I came to feel that he's busy, he's not well, and he must be knackered.

I wished him well, and that was enough for me. I still do, and it still is.

I've written and illustrated this newsletter because I wanted to bear witness to something. If you found it interesting, I hope you will write - very soon, before it's too late - to your MP about this dreadful case. Thank you.