

Into the Valley of Death, rode the SOO

Tommy

Belfast. God, nothing much changes. A drab nineteenth century industrial backwater that the late twentieth century has not treated well. The city centre is a monument to the industry that made Belfast in the last decade of the nineteenth century the commercial nexus of the British Empire. More tonnage of ships were built and launched from Belfast in that decade than the rest of the world combined. Belfast factories, foundries and mills supplied the world's most industrialised country with all its requirements and then some. In Toronto, late at night and early in the morning, I regaled people whose history begins when Belfast's starts to decline with these tales.

Then I come home and see what the city has become. Once proud industrial strengths now exist on the meagre scrapings from a government forced by circumstance and political impasse to investing millions by way of welfare payments and public investment. A people, skilled and able to build an empire, now inhabit sad and pale imitations of workplaces. Make work factories, Dilbert like offices doing the work for London and the South East of England and long queues at the dole office. The pubs and clubs have an ersatz look about them: fake Americana ('we're alright...') or pseudo Old Irish charm. The people of Belfast forced into becoming part of a show in order to enjoy a pint.

And the politicians... The same pathetic excuses for political debate, the same mantra trotted out to rouse the passions and dreams of a country that just wants to go to work in the morning. An end to violence is not just the laying down of arms, not just a paramilitary cease-fire or the censure of their acts. In order to achieve this there has to be real and meaningful political debate. There has to be trust amongst the political parties. A willingness to give up the past and welcome the future. That is as likely as Turkey's...

Narrow minded, self-serving bigots is a phrase that springs to mind when I think of these politicians. If Northern Ireland ever does get some form of parliament I will be surprised if any of the current batch of party leaders will be substantially involved. The politics of sectarianism have no place in the to-ing and fro-ing of political debate. Unfortunately, I do not hold out much hope.

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Why then did I come back?

I honestly don't know. I've been trying to come up with a satisfactory reason for the past two weeks. Normally after a major session on the booze my true self opens up and I can admit, if only to myself, what I really believe. For most people this a 4am cold sweat realisation that is quickly buried as they try to get back to sleep and get ready for another day at the office. But even that half-awake dread of what your life has become had no recourse for me now. A few pints of introspection bring up nothing but bile and leaves a nasty taste in my mind.

Toronto wasn't working, of that at least I'm sure. Canadian immigration weren't too keen on the solipsism in my application form and the semantic points I made in my defence were quickly dispatched with relative ease. True I was thoroughly enjoying my time at Allen's bar and restaurant - although the hours and the lifestyle were wearing me down on a daily basis. I had also made inroads to Toronto fannish fandom, but given what had existed before that was not too difficult. Apart from that there wasn't much in Toronto to keep me there, my family all had their own lives which didn't intersect with mine and there was no-one I was sufficiently interested in to hold me there.

Of course this is where my two trips out west come in. Lesley Reece and I hit it off enough that I seriously thought about moving out there. My first few days back in Belfast were depressing enough that I nearly did. However, as Alanis insists one and one never make one, always two. I have to figure out exactly what the hell I'm doing with my 'So Called' life before even thinking about sharing, let alone imposing, it upon someone else.

And that when all is said and done is why I'm home. I don't think it is a satisfactory reason: I've no idea what to do with my life so I've come home to figure it out. I mean, why leave in the first place? I could have had a whole year to properly figure things out, take a lot of time and really get to grips with potentialities and possibilities. Yeah, either that or go off the rails completely. It was the right decision to leave last year, even if, in the long run it made no substantial difference to my life. Coming back to Belfast was the only realistic decision left to me this summer.

For the future? Well at the very least Christmas with my parents and family - something to look forward to with apprehension as well as delight. Some time in Harris to get some cash together and maybe some temporary work. Next year will bring a new outlook and, probably, a new country. Unfortunately it will be the same old Tommy, same old psychosis and the same old attitude. At least it will give Mark a break though... Some temporary work.



Memoirs of a former Fanzine editor

James

Low key intro... to misquote Nicky E. Grinder. I'll just ease myself back into this writing thing, after all my last screed was in Gö2; no shocks or deeply personal revelations (and anyway I couldn't compete with Tommy). The lads have prodded me back to writing and let me tell you that 10,000v doesn't half sting.

A recent screening of *Contact* at the local multiplex has restored my faith in cinema in general, and sf cinema in particular. *Contact* was transcendental. I came out stunned, wanting on one hand to run out and evangelise people, to make it compulsory viewing for every impressionable being on the planet. On the other, I wanted to find a quiet corner and have a good cry at the beauty, the sense of wonder that is so remarkably absent from so much of sf in book and filmed form.

Cinema, for me, over the past year has been fairly unremarkable though my sporadic attendance pattern has not helped, I'm sure. Some films e.g. *Austin Powers International Man of Mystery* raised a chuckle but others in the 'okay' bracket have become annoying by their wish fulfilment. Case in point - *The Long Kiss Goodnight*. A good 'leave-brain-at-door' movie some might say but this overall pattern of all right in the end, against all odds eventually grates. *Men in Black*, the sf equivalent of APIMoM, whilst having a happy ending, succeeds where *Independence Day* does not by its use of humour. Again *Mars Attacks!* is an excellent film because it doesn't take itself seriously for a moment. Some sf movies can survive the three minute culture without (over)using humour, e.g. *12 Monkeys* and still be commercially successful with a dark ending.

Which brings me to the stimulus for this rant - *Event Horizon*. Reasonable acting skills, state of the art special effects and plenty of money. A good initial premise - a rescue mission mounted when an FTL ship returns after several years, derelict but functioning on the outer edge of the solar system. Elements of mystery, a scientist with a tragic past and an ambiguous last message from the vanished crew.

A film taking itself seriously. Yet one of the worst sf movies I have ever seen. So what went wrong? A tragic lack of plot. It was obvious within the first few seconds. A spacecraft door opens with an earsplitting crack intended to make the audience jump. Fine, *Alien* relies on much the same opening gambit. But unfortunately where *Alien* pulls back and builds up the tension until it's required, Non-*Event Horizon* relies on a continuous series of 'doors' all the way through. There is no suspension of disbelief and it gets to the stage where you think, 'no matter what happens next, I am *not* going to jump'. Unfortunately, it needs to rely on these party tricks because there is no plot to speak of. The crew run from one ship to another incessantly and nothing happens. *Solaris* meets *The Black Hole* meets the *Amityville Horror*. How much can good scriptwriting cost? A tragic waste of time and effort.

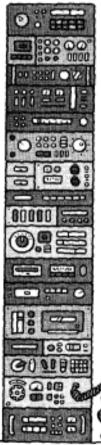
Which makes *Contact* doubly refreshing. As good a movie as could have been made from the book, which as I remember was competent. I read Frederick Pohl's *Gold at the Starbow's End* around the same time, which also dealt with first contact themes and thought it somewhat better. I was initially doubtful of Jodie Foster as the lead and Robert Zemekis didn't inspire confidence but both excelled. See it in the cinema if you can.

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On the music front things are fairly good at the moment. Haven't been to any concerts lately, excepting the U2 gig which was happening at the end of the street (literally).

Was in London recently and finally located Rough Trade in Neal's Yard. An easy place to miss, as Mark and I did on our last look for it. Not being a skateboard head, an initial glance through the door was off-putting but spurred on by the presence of half a dozen vinyl 12 inches in the window I found a spiral staircase leading to a small basement of delights. Initially very psyched out by a zillion bands I'd never heard of, I was extremely glad to come across Stereolab's *Mars Audiac Quintet*. Next shock was a Microdisney album, obscure and on CD whereas all my previous experience of them have been on vinyl. Even more surprising were a couple of Cindytalk (one third / quarter?) of *This Mortal Coil*.

My CD buying spree took me next to Tower Records. I've never had much problem with turning thirty (in March) but it's still a bit strange to have it confirmed by the purchase of my first Philip Glass soundtrack. I've always liked music to *Mishima*, the scene at the golden temple remaining long after most of the other small details have faded from memory. However, it may not be as indicative as I'd first thought, as I could have bought it at any time in the last five years if there was one decent record shop in Belfast.



It's funny how in your twenties you are to an extent defined by what you listen to. In the last couple of years and with a large collection of CDs and tapes I still find that I have precious little to listen to. Britpop doesn't leave me cold so much as make me gag. It angers me that so many derivative and talentless bands should be taking up so much shelf space and airtime. Acid Jazz, no thanks. Jungle, not yet. But in the search for something to listen to my tastes have broadened if only slightly to include some classical and dance. Music, in general, is just no longer so important now, not as defining, though I still wish it was. The old/new stuff can still stir the emotions. Got a copy of Fatima Mansion's *Lost in the Former West* last week, an album I'd never heard of. I suspect it was their last album (© 1994) before splitting up, which is a pity, since it's their best *since Against Nature*.

Other listens of late - John Parish and Polly Jean Harvey's *Dance Hall at Louse Point* and Babes in Toyland's *Fontanelle*. I've eventually caught up with the brilliant Stereolab, thanks to Mark's incessant twitterings about them. Sonic Youth style drone rock done French style with Moogs and socialism. Also good is Half Man Half Biscuit's *Voyage to the Bottom of the Road*. You'd think those guys would run out of people to take the piss out of.

Waiting for the Fall's new album, *Levitate*, Cahal Coughlan's solo album and Stereolab's latest. Some are already out but will take several weeks to penetrate to the farthest reaches of Empire.

John Peel is just playing Joy Division's *Love Will Tear Us Apart* but it sounds like it's being sung by Elvis. Jimmy 'the King' Brown and the Questionnaires from the album *Gravelands* on Dressed to Kill Records. Pop has a future.

El Cucharacha cubana

I awoke this morning at 5am; scratching. I got up and put on the light because it was still dark. I found I had developed two massive bruises; one on my neck and one on my arm. I put on some cream to relieve the persistent itch. Must have been the mosquitoes during the tropical rainfall yesterday afternoon...

Had a 'light' breakfast of one bread bun, half a cup of yoghurt (all that was left) and one banana. The house was full of flies. *Que kako*... It's the first time I've seen them this year. There must be over one hundred of them in the room and they're also on my plate... argghh! Must have been the tropical rainfall yesterday afternoon.

What is always here though (come hail, rain or shine) is the phenomenon of the *cucharacha cubana* (remember?) Yes, the infamous "cook-ar-acha" – (don't forget to give it that guttural Glaswegian "a-chaa" at the end – sounds just like a good sneeze really). *Vamos...*

They truly are the strangest of creatures in many ways. Like myself, I often wonder why they came here in the first place... Selma tells me that the smallest species disembarked from a German boat many years ago. As for the larger race, I know nothing of their point of origin, which remains shrouded in mystery to this day.

Many people here say that the *cucharacha* is a synonym for "immortality". Tell me about it! I've been in Havana for two years now and still haven't got rid of the blasted things!

What do they look like? Like Cubans in general they come, as it were, in three basic

hues: Black, white (or all they albinos?) and mulatto or coffee coloured. The latter are predominate and blend in with the environs, in this case the furniture (some kind of Darwinian advantage I presume?)

Behavioural patterns? When breeding they virtually stick together and are inseparable. Nothing out of the ordinary in that really I suppose. They live in families in a 'semiconventional' sort of way and the smaller types are generally faster movers, in terms of locomotion that is (I can't vouch for the sexual aspect fortunately). However, don't be fooled. The big buggers can sure move as well when the mood takes them. And what is worse, when you are just about to give them that fatal wham-bam-thank-you-mam, thump with a shoe or whatever object comes nearest to hand, they fly for you face, usually for the area of the mouth. "It's not easy", as the Cubans so often say... It's not easy.

The Random Dictionary of the English Language concisely describes them as "orthopterous insects of the family *Blattidae*, characterised by a flattened body, rapid movements, and usually nocturnal habits." Can virgins continue to slumber peacefully in their beds with such "pests" running at large? I wonder...

As stated, they have a tendency to come out at night or when the lights are off. However,

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after residing in the same environment for several months, some may become "domesticated" and begin to go for strolls around the living room during daylight hours.

Indeed it often seems that every day is Sunday afternoon for some! If only they could speak to me, maybe we could be on first names terms.

I've tried on several occasions to 'exterminate' the beasts with varying degrees of success, none total, I hasten to add. To be truthful, and it pains me to say it, I've tried various types and assortments of exotic powders and dangerous looking liquids but at best have only managed to slay a few dozen or so at most.

First of all, I tried pouring boiling water over any that didn't manage to get away in time (well, it works for lobsters). However, a weary work-mate of mine informed me that scalding water only serves to kill the parents and incubate the unborn babies who emerge warmed and ready to go a few days later.

She proceeded to expand her 'theory of death' to me. You should fill them with alcohol, she suggested. I laughed in disbelief imagining how much worse it would be to have all those little devil roaches scuttling around pissed.

No, *pure* alcohol, she added quickly. As I continued to chuckle dismissively at her naivety she explained that you take a plastic Pet bottle, pierce a hole in the top, fill it with C_2 HSOH and squirt.

Then she told me an anecdote of her 'method' of ridding her flat of a past plague. Several months ago she couldn't sleep because of boyfriend problems so at 3am one morning she jumped out of bed shouting "This is War!" (Author's note – Don't cross a Cuban woman – believe me, I know from experience). Steadily she made her way towards the kitchen and put on the light. Four *cucharachas* came out of the sink.

Grabbing the readily accessible bottle, she squeezed. Then she quickly struck a match and dropped it on top of the alcohol saturated roaches, burning them to death.

"Pure *assassination*," she hissed in my ear, relishing the memory.

Cubans love to make comical comments on aspects of daily life. The *cucharacha cubana* is no exception... For example, my cockroach fumigator tells me that if a small one manages to enter the human ear it will continue right through the eardrum rather than turn around and retrace its steps. In that case the only solution is to head quickly to the nearest hospital (in Cuba, thank God, there are many) and have it extracted piece by piece. Now, don't misunderstand me; I'm not advising you to wear earmuffs in Cuba as the weather is quite hot and it might be a cause for comment. But care is required...

Another person I know once made homemade wine. She placed a gauze on top of the container waiting for the juice to ferment. Needless to say, a roach managed to get in and drowned in the liquid. After the required fermenting period, she decided to have a tipple. Thinking that the solid matter in the glass was merely sediment, she squashed it down with a spoon and began drinking. Once she realised what it really was she began to vomit violently, "*como una loca*" as she herself told me ('just like a crazy woman').

To Think Again Alison Freebairn

Don't get me wrong. Just 'cos I was born in this little cragged country don't mean I have to lower my achingly high standards - even when it comes to football.

Just 'cos I loathe the English national side (it's too full of wife-beating bastards, drunkards and models for my liking) don't mean I have to don crap clothes and applaud appalling jingoistic journeymen masquerading as athletes.

So I took a ticket for the Scotland vs Austria World Cup Qualifier out of curiosity rather than nationalist fervour. The trash tartan drummer-girl-in-a-plastic-tube mentality of post-Braveheart Scotland is an embarrassment to me - I have blocked out any sense of shame drawn from the Tartan Army's blinkered (but well-behaved) antics.

So I find myself at a Scotland match. Ha, I can't believe I'm doing this. My sense of nationality is fierce and true and solid, and it has nothing to do with nationalism. My worries over my own attitudes - toward the match, the fans and my own dislike of the Scotland team - occupy my mind until I leave the M8 and find myself in the cold with nothing but Kevin McDermott for company.

I'm stuck in two lanes of stationary traffic, cars and vans and buses of saddoes in bad scarves and inflated ideas of adequacy. And I'm stuck beside a bus full of ten year-olds with 40-year-old eyes, little men who stare down from their lofty position straight onto my legs as I change gear. I only wish I'd changed out of this dress before I left work.

The lads in the van in front wave hands and scarves at me, possibly mistaking me for a commuter, and the little boys in the bus make faces through the glass as we all inch forward. I glance over at the bus. Big mistake.

One of the urchins holds a piece of paper up to the window. It reads "What's Your Phone Number Darling?"

The long walk to the Janefield Street entrance brought back way too many memories. The U2 gig in 1993 that I contrived to ignore, thanks to Davy and Brian. Celtic-daft Davy and I kneeling on the canvas covering the sacred turf of Paradise, slowly peeling back the toughened cotton to reveal the beautifully curved wide white line that proved, beyond doubt, that we were squatting on the centre circle of Celtic Park.

Bono is going through the multi-million dollar motions and we couldn't give a shit. This moment is worth the $\pounds 20$ cover charge alone.

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Brian and I are arsing about as per usual, two good friends doing impressions of the great and the godawful, and half way through an exceptional one-two of Del-Boy and Boycey, we kiss, suddenly, improvisationally, like a slash Only Fools.

I look at my good friend and the implications are drowned out by the sudden, horrific realisation that I have just kissed a Rangers supporter. Aaaaaaaaaaaaagh!

Other memories - beautiful, now-impossible memories - of Partick Thistle. My team, the Jags, the Harry Wraggs, the Maryhill Magyars. On my last visit to Parkhead - sorry, Celtic Park - we beat the Hoops 1-2.

So I stand at turnstile six and watch the punters. Every cliché you can think of? Go ahead. Trot them out. You're nowhere near. Drunken jocks in kilts, sporting fake trash tartan tokens.... many of them have bigger breasts than me. I will soon be forced to build an extension to host my embarrassment and contempt.

Ladies and gentlemen, take the Tartan Army. Please.

I arrive in the lower west stand ten minutes from kick-off. Brian, Kenny and Mark are already ensconced. I find myself sitting next to all 6'5" of Mark. I'm delighted to find that he is experiencing his first Scottish International, as am I, and that he is as cynical as I about the expected performances and eventual outcome of the game. I've got few lines ready, and decide that the evening won't be a write-off if I can make Mark laugh uncontrollably on five separate occasions. Here we go. The standard of football on display is appalling, even to a Jags supporter. Austria are impressive in the first quarter. Fabulous passing and some real chances that fail to bear fruit. I'm scared. So I do what I always do when faced with situations that I can't control - I try to be funny. Mark is a receptive humour magnet. I churn out lines; he laughs fit to burst. At this rate, I can go home before half time.

With my usual timing, I'm running out my most promising line when Kevin Gallacher scores for Scotland. What a git. I mourn the loss of my potentially devastating humour even as I celebrate the goal, reassured that I haven't lost the knack of shooting myself in the foot.

Brian picks his way across to stand at my side, blocking my view of the cute dark stranger two rows down, but a welcome presence all he same. He has noted the behaviour of the Huns On My Right, and feels compelled to intervene.

"Is that big guy bothering you?" he asks, looking even more like Tommy Burns with his brow furrowed.

"Who, Mark?" I reply archly, missing the point with glee and vigour. "He's been an absolute sweetheart. He's tall, though. I don't think we'd see eye to eye."

Brian's eyes slide off my face with ease. 1993 seems a long time ago. I wonder how long it seems for him. Too f—king long, I suspect.

Hey, hey, half time is over. Thank f-k.

••••••••••••••Götterdämmerung #10••••••••••••

A few half-hearted passes go nowhere and I ache for the beauty and delicacy of an Aljosha Asanovic or the purpose and passion of a Diego Fuser, but this is Scotland - not Croatia or Italy. Dream on.

I turn to find that Mark, the gentle giant, is puce-faced and spitting foam. "SHITE! SHITE! Call that a pass, ya wanker? Get AFF! Get AFF! Go on, pass the ball, NOW! NOW! Aaaw, USELESS BASTARD!"

The Huns On My Right haven't taken to Chelsea's (and now Celtic's) gap-toothed sweetheart Craig Burley. From where I am sitting, he is having a very good game. He's a solid midfielder and his passing has been almost faultless. But two inches can make all the difference. Hun #1 isn't impressed by Burley's 40 yard sprint up the wing, or by his inch-perfect pass which was intercepted by a perceptive Austrian defender.

"Ah, f—k off back to London, ya POOF! F—k off back to Ruud Gullit and grow some f—king dreadlocks. Ya f—king ENGLISH player ye!"

Okay, so he isn't the best player on the park, but I know a man who is. I can remember watching Paul Lambert play for Motherwell, and he was never this good. A sharp player, intelligent on the ball and a bloody hard worker, sure, but he was never this classy. Three months after this match I will watch Paul Lambert lift the European Cup. I used to watch him lift cups of orange juice at Fir Park, you know. Whaurs yer Alex Ferguson noo?

Lambert has done pretty f-king well since he quit the 'Well. And he is great

tonight. There is nothing to separate him from the equally stunning figure of John Collins, now a integral part of a Monaco side that ate up the French championship last season and has come back for seconds in 1997/98.

Something is badly wrong here. In my lifetime, Scotland has never had great players, not since the glory days of Stein's Celtic, not since those other supremely talented Jocks played for the bastard Man*****r Un**d back when we had an excuse not to loathe the slimy whinging gits.

But the prowess of two internationallyhardened players will not salvage a national side. I watch the fag ends, burst balloons and crisp packets perform their sad ballet across that same Parkhead centre circle that I had kissed in a moment of madness three years previously, and turn to the tall, green-eyed impossibility on my left.

"Look at that trash on the pitch. It makes Gary McAllister look good."

Mark doubles over with a short, barking laugh, and I feel my work is done. I'm reasonably content. I mean, this is only Scotland. It's not like they'll get anywhere in the World Cup. Forza Italia!

The bloody Tartan Army starts a rather sad "Bonnie Scotland, Bonnie Scotland! We'll support you evermore!" song. My version, which goes like the above but with "until you meet Italy and see what real football is all about" is less snappy, but every bit as heartfelt.

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And then Jackson twists around in the box and the ball falls to Kevin Gallacher, some fifteen yards out on the right wing. He skuffs the ball with the inside of his right foot and we think he's bottled it, no way is it going anywhere, but it soars, and soars, and curls in the air, and soars right over the 'keeper and into the top left corner of the net.

It's a goal worthy of Zinedine Zidane. Worthy of Alessandro Del Piero (well, almost). Pavel Nedved would weep. Either way, it is too good a goal to have been scored by a Scotland player who earns a crust with Blackburn bloody Rovers. Later on, it will look as though it was set up by a lucky deflection rather than Darren Jackson, but that doesn't matter at the moment.

Mark and I find ourselves seeing green eye to grey eye. That's because we have launched ourselves eachotherwards, he has swept me off my feet and I'm hugging him and I'm laughing and crying, and so is he.

Kenny, my sweet dear friend, my sweetheart, my barometer, the kindest loveliest heterosexual man I will ever know, prises a hand away and I'm laughing over Mark's shoulder, one arm damn near pulled from its socket by an exuberant Kenny, and I am totally lost in the moment. Hello, I've lost it.

"Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be,

We're going to Gay Paree, que sera sera."

Not satisfied with the self-satisfied chants of World Cup qualifying glory, I join in with the anti-English chants so beloved of the Tartan Army.

"We hate Jimmy Hill, he's a poof, he's a poof"

"Stand Uuuuuup! If you hate England."

Repeat both ad nauseum, unless you find another chant. And with ten minutes to go, and a sudden surge from Austria, we find another with fifty thousand voices and enough emotion to make the most cynical observer weep.

And that's me, boys and girls. The Celt with the deadly mind and the vicious adherence to la dolce vita, the one who cringed at pictures of the Tartan Army, the football fanatic who hated her own national team and was fated to throw body and soul behind the Azzurri, to wear the blue of Italy and to forsake her countrymen for the sublime skill and dizzying passion of the Italian national side.

For the first time in eighteen years, I feel real guilt. I'm not Italian. I was born in Scotland via Ireland and Orkney. These are my people. John McGinlay was born a stones throw from where I grew up, Corpach to my Spean Bridge. And Jim Leighton.

Jim Leighton, born and bred three miles from where I spent my school years. My hero. Everybody's hero. The goalkeeper who is constantly passed over in favour of a fat hun with a gambling problem (Rangers' Andy Goram) and whose heroics in the dying minutes of my first international prompts the sad, bigoted Scottish ••••••••••••••Götterdämmerung #10••••••••••••

supporters, those shortbread-tinpot soldiers I despised until tonight, to break into a song my heart has sung for years.

"One Jim Leighton! There's only one Jim Leighton!"

Brian and I start a Wayne's World-style 'we're not worthy' routine in the fifteenth row and watch, bemused and fiercely proud, as it is taken up by the whole west stand. Jim, poised and ready even though the action is now focused on the Austria goal, glances up at us with a smile that blocks out the floodlights. For a moment, it looks like he is staring straight at me.

It's a beautiful moment.

I savour it for as long as I can, pausing only to plant a kiss on Brian's cheek as he runs for his bus, rebuffing my offer of a lift back to Uddingston. Three years is a lifetime. But for those darling, rare moments, I feel like staging a pitch invasion to rival my only previous illegal, bloodmaddened footie-thug foray onto turf (at Ibrox in 1986, and I nearly broke a leg trying to avoid the stewards as I slid through a barricade).

I want to run onto the pitch and hug Jim Leighton. Instead, I decide to kiss Mark and Kenny, and leave Celtic Park behind in favour of a two-minute head start on the inevitable traffic jams, and the tinpot tartan soldiers on their way back to normality.

I've barely cleared the Braveheartbollocks-touting touts before the almighty cheer breaks the sky. It's all over. We've won 2-0, and one more win will see us at the 1998 World Cup. Walking away, grinning like an idiot, I am almost at my car when a terrifying thought strikes me.

What do I mean, "We"? 🗞

Where are they now?

A lot has happened since I thrashed out this story in April 1997.

- □ Scotland qualified for France 1998 as best runners-up, having lost against Sweden and with wins against and Latvia. The story of how I missed the Latvia rout will have to wait for another fanzine.
 - Italy shot themselves in the foot with Freebairnesque ease, drawing with Georgia (whit? whit? how could they?) and finding themselves unable to score against England at the Stadio Olympico. So the only unbeaten team in that group, the team with the best defensive record, was forced into the playoffs while an inferior England side, which was well-beaten by Italy at Wembley, topped the group. The Gazzetta Della Sport, the funky Italian pink paper, anguished over the draw with a lyricism my faltering Italian could scarcely interpret, but one phrase shone through: the journalist covering the match felt Woody Allen would have looked more convincing up front ...

My brief transformation into a fetishistic foot-soldier lasted until I reached the parental home whereupon mother had the presence of mind to slap my face.

I will be going to France 98, but I won't be wearing a mini-kilt.

Java For Dummies

Coming home to Belfast from Toronto and, especially, Seattle has left me in a quandary. I have become, if not addicted, at least accustomed to the easy access to good coffee and excellent espresso. In Toronto the bar I worked in had a wonderful espresso/Cappuccino machine which enabled me to get a wonderful fix every time I went to work. And when it was really busy and there was no time to make myself a decent cappuccino (yes it got that busy) there was the fresh coffee from recently ground Colombian coffee beans on hand. I was never more than 10 seconds away from a caffeine fix.

In Seattle things were even better. My first visit there, for Potlatch in February of 1997, opened my eyes to the possibilities of espresso. Previously I'd just make a single shot and beat it down my neck. If I had the time I would make a double shot and sit back, relax and enjoy it. Watching coffee vendors in Seattle rustle up iced espresso, cold Cappuccinos and things with chocolate and cream in them made me realise that Coffee flavoured liqueurs was the least of things to be done with this wonderful beverage.

My return visit to Seattle saw me experimenting with some of these different ideas. Cold coffee, or iced coffee, is a concept like decaffeinated diet coke, that is equivalent to the spawn of the devil. So, I went out with Lesley one day to her favourite coffee house (Bauhaus on Pine and about 12th) and in true tourist fashion, ordered whatever the lady was having.

Fortunately this was an occasion where Lesley was in not in a hurry so a quad shot of espresso wasn't what I got. What I did get was a 'Double Tall Americano' which is just about self-explanatory: two shots of espresso in a tall cup, topped off with hot water. It was a bit like a Jackson Pollack: I didn't know what it was, but I knew I liked it. When Lesley told me that it wasn't just some rare, mountain top coffee bean which had been roasted within an inch of its life and then left to stew for three years I thought: 'Of course, what a good idea!' and was hooked.

Returning to Toronto I found that the local coffee chain, The Second Cup, also had Americanos on their menu. I was staying with a colleague from work for two weeks before returning to Belfast and there was a Second Cup at the end of his street – I was a caffeine junky. In the morning that would be my fix for the day and, believe it or not, I would find myself relaxing with a take out Double Tall Americano when I returned at night. For two solid weeks I drank more coffee than any human has a need for, I really was hooked.

Upon returning to Belfast my acquired North American ways were given the usual Northern Irish treatment, a mixture of charm, wit and friendly disdain:

"Take that stupid fucking Baseball cap off, Tommy. You look like a prat..."

"Hiya Nyree, it is good to see you again after all this time..." There is something endearing about the Northern Irish character that the use of insults as greetings seems to typify. I suppose the ultimate in friendly approaches, given this logic, would be to shoot someone. Well it would explain a lot of the tragedy that occurs in this little part of Ireland that we call our own.

"And now today's News Headlines... More friends kill each other after a long period of absence. This from Brendan..." And so on.

"So what is new, Tommy?" this from Mark McCann my new landlord. Yeah, I know, but what the hell.

"I've really got into this Seattle coffee thing, Mark, and now drink Double Tall Americanos." I knew

Mark didn't drink coffee and was not too enamoured of those people for whom it is vital ingredient of every day living. Even so I thought, "Jesus, you are a pretentious posing prat" was a bit much. Insults with alliteration, a McCann speciality that one.

Ignoring the jibes and insults I set off in my first few days in Belfast and, subsequently, Derry to see if I could find somewhere that did take-out espresso the way it should be. In the neighbourhood where I now live, a few streets away from my old house in Ava Drive, there was little or no chance of decent coffee – apart from the Italian ice cream place around the corner. They had a really old-fashioned espresso machine, all brass and copper like, and no-one in the whole place knew how to use it properly. Instead of a shot of espresso they let the hot water continually drip through the coffee until it filled a teacup. Urrgh!

I spread my search further afield and found a place in town, near Mark's office, which did a reasonable imitation of espresso. They even had proper plastic cups with a drinking aperture to take out. However I thought $\pounds 1.35$ (US\$2.05 and Cnd\$2.90) for an espresso a bit on the steep side and it was at least two miles from where I lived. If in town maybe...

My Belfast search was interrupted by a visit to the Aged Ps in Derry and a three hour tour of the town (I went around twice) turned up two places, both of which are too horrible to even describe. The espresso shot as a regular coffee measure was a recurring theme – probably something to do with value for money, certainly nothing to do with taste. As if I needed another reason to leave Derry and come back to Belfast.

"Have you tried the place in Stranmillis, Tommy?" from Katherine Robinson, Eugene Doherty's wife. Stranmillis is just across the river from where I live, a nice, yuppie sort of neighbourhood about five minutes walk away. No I hadn't, what was it like? "If you like coffee, you'll like it."

Saved! These people had obviously been to the states. It is called the Ground floor, has comfy so-fas and may be trying to do a Friend's "*Central*

Perk" type of idea. It also did take out coffee in proper cups, had a customer loyalty card (buy ten coffees, get one free) and a Double Tall Americano was only $\pounds 1.05$. Apart from all that I didn't have to tell them what it was – the guy just smiled turned and made it. Still smiling he handed it to me and said: "That is the first decent coffee I've made all day. Thanks."

"No, thank you." I replied after taking a sip. The search for real coffee was over.

You know you're drinking too much coffee when . . . You haven't blinked since the last lunar eclipse. You grind your coffee beans in your mouth. You sleep with your eyes open. You have to watch videos in fastforward The only time you're standing still is during an earthquake. You can take a picture of yourself from ten feet away without using the timer. You lick your coffeepot clean. You've worn out your third pair of tennis shoes this week. Your eyes stay open when you sneeze. ☐ You chew on other people's fingernails. The nurse needs a scientific calculator to take your pulse. ☐ Your T-shirt says, "Decaffeinated coffee is the devil's coffee." Your so iittery that people use your hands to blend their margaritas. You can type sixty words per minute with your feet. You can jump-start your car without cables. Cocaine is a downer. You don't sweat, you percolate. People get dizzy just watching you. Instant coffee takes too long. You have a picture of your coffee mug on your coffee mug.

••••••••••••••••••••The Fall 1997••••••••••••••

Night-clubbing

It was about one forty-five in the morning and Lavery's Gin Palace was well into the first serious stages of chucking its hapless customers out onto the street. Burly self important bouncers, festooned with earphones and radio-mikes, were screaming: "Move along now folks, *please*!" whilst pouring any unfinished beer into plastic cups which they pressed into drinkers' hands, shouting, "You can finish it *outside*."

Being a deceptively large pub, this customerdisgorging process can only be carried out safely if it's done in various discreet stages. The younger teenagers are first to leave. High on E, untarnished hope and Purple Nasties, they are shepherded down stairs from the attic disco to emerge blinking onto Bradbury Place where the girls cry on each others' shoulders, or vomit into the gutter, and the guys look nervously about to see who they can fail to get off with before making their way home.

The middle floor is usually the next to be ejected. A more difficult bunch to deal with - a motley collection of Goths, art student poseurs and would-be music-types - they protest that 'Oscar Wilde wouldn't have had to put up with such discourtesy.'

"Just move your sodding arse," retorts the irresistibly witty bouncer whilst pouring another unfinished pint into another plastic cup. "At least wait until I finish my Gitane... please," cries a hysterical girl whom everyone ignores. They're a dime a dozen around here.

The final stage is the eviction of the residents of the 'bottom bar' and adjacent 'back bar'. You've heard of sink estates? Well, this is Lavery's very own 'sink bar'.

The first time you enter Lavery's you may well mistakenly find yourself in this very section but you will have the presence of mind and sharpness of reflexes to get out as quickly as possible.

However, if you drink in Lavery's for long enough, you will inevitably find yourself drawn to this ground floor bar as surely as sediment settles to the bottom of your glass of Old Bushy Tail. You might well start your days as a bright, seventeen year old sexy blond bopping in your Kookaï skirt to the Chemical Brothers in the Attic Disco. But eventually ennui and gravity will drag you to the bottom bar having first turned you into a drunken forty-five year old hag who spends most evenings fighting with a prostitute from the Donegal Road over the ownership of a mouldy leather jacket. It's just a force of nature.

We got out of the bottom bar at about 2.15am. Several hundred drunken individuals were milling about Bradbury Place singing "There's only one Salman Rushdie" - all of them thinking about the possibility of having a bargain bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken with maybe a delicious serving of those micro-waved baked beans that burn the tissue off the roof of your mouth. Most will sensibly reject this idea before going home.

"I want another drink, Mark. Let's go somewhere else."

Billy steadies himself by leaning on my shoulder. He's looking about for the girl he had been chatting to for the past hour. A sulky dark haired woman of indeterminate age with lipstick on her teeth, she drank five Rum and Cokes while I was still trying to finish a bottle of Grolsch.

"You could put flowers in that," she had told me earlier pointing at my Grolsch bottle. I stared at her, not comprehending her meaning. "Sorry?"

"It would make a nice ornament – that bottle. It's got a funny top."

••••••••••••••Götterdämmerung #10••••••••••••

As if by magic our sulky blade with an eye for interior design is spat out through Lavery's front door where Billy manages to lead her away from the swaying crowd. He puts his arm around her shoulder with a show of concern for her wellbeing but she forces him off.

"Are we going back to your place now?" she asks Billy. "I'm knackered."

Billy looks at me with a pained expression and I try to picture what his wife would do if we landed back at his home. Make us a cup of tea perhaps?

"Naw, love," Billy answers hurriedly. "I was thinking we could go on to a club first."

I find this suggestion very funny and laugh out loud. The idea of a 'club' in Belfast! What a comedian! Billy looks sternly in my direction and I stop.

The Surly Blade gives it some consideration. "What sort of club?"

"You know - a private drinking establishment," Billy explains.

I suspect that Billy's idea of a 'club' won't necessarily match that of Sour Puss. But she seems vaguely interested.

"Okay, let's go to a club."

That much decided Billy and Sour Puss begin to snog in the middle of Shaftesbury Square, not noticing that they've narrowly missed being knocked over by a speeding car. Billy's hands slide up the back of Sour's short dress.

"Listen, Billy. I think I'll push on home now," I say, feeling a little bit like a spare wheel.

We'd been out since lunchtime and I really didn't feel like making the effort of staying awake for much longer - certainly not as resident gooseberry. I'd only agreed to go out with Billy to cheer him up - but he seemed to have got over his depression quite well by this stage.

"You're not going home yet," Billy tells me while grabbing my arm. "The night is still young. I mean, how often do we get out together?"

The answer is, thankfully, not very often; but I can't say that. We're standing next to the Moghul Kebab House and I ruefully reflect that if I'd gone to the science fiction meeting tonight as planned I'd be safely at home by now instead of standing here watching two people getting it on.

"Let's get a taxi!" yells Billy.

Thirty minutes later and we're flying through East Belfast in the back of a minicab. It's almost 3am. The driver's radio is blasting rave music at us. Billy and Sour Puss are swigging from a bottle of Bacardi she was carrying in her bag. From the open handbag spills packets of condoms and sachets of sugar. I absently open one of the sachets of sugar and pour it into my mouth.

"That's right," exclaims Billy. "Keep your energy levels up. You'll need it for where we're going."

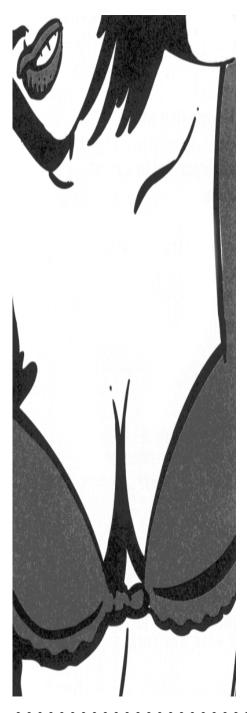
Outside it's started to rain and gangs of men in hooded tops are prowling the streets. I want to be home.

"What about those black holes, eh?" shouts the taxi driver over the music. "I mean, that Hawking guy just does my head in. I say to myself - 'There's just some things we'll never know', eh?"

We slide across the backseat as the taxi takes a vicious left. I wonder if taxi drivers feel they have a professional obligation to live up to their popular image as opinionated boors? Does the responsibility of such customer expectation weigh heavy on their shoulders?

"What I *don't* get is this 'origins of the universe stuff', right? I mean, how can we be expected to believe in this, whatsyemacallit, inflationary theory? It just doesn't make sense, does it, eh? I mean, like, I can just about *get* quantum foam - I see it as a sort of fuzzy stuff that's not quite there - but bubbles in superspace? That's just for the birds."





Usually, it's the sort of conversation I'd be willing to engage in - even with a taxi driver. You get a higher level of conversation with your average taxi driver in Belfast. Many of them are Open University graduates who (for various 'political' reasons about which we wouldn't go into here) had plenty of time on their hands for ten to fifteen years during the 70s and 80s. They got educated. Driving cars at high speed through red lights is definitely a waste of their many talents.

But I'm ill, nervous and depressed and Sour Puss and Billy are trying to make babies beside me. I don't want to talk cosmology right now. I just kind of give a nod of encouragement in the general direction of the driver to show that I'm listening.

"I *do* take my hat off to Fred Hoyle. Now, there was a gentleman and a scholar. None of this inflationary malarky from him, eh? If you ask me, steady-state still has a lot going for it. Makes sense, really, doesn't it?"

"What the fuck are you on about?" Billy asks after extracting Puss's tongue from his throat. He nudges me in the ribs. "Can he not just drive the car and leave us in peace?"

The driver checks his rear-view mirror to give Billy an eyeball-to-eyeball but says no more. I'm too drunk to care. I being to feel that twelve hours of sleep would be useful right about now.

The car drops from ninety miles an hour to a full stop in the middle of a residential street lined with redbrick terraced houses. I'm disorientated but I think it's somewhere off the Cregagh Road. Or maybe it's the opposite end of town and we're in the Village? I can't tell. Wherever - it's a part of town I'm not too comfortable with.

Billy pays the driver who advises us to read more cosmology. "It's a big place out there and you've got to keep improving yourself, eh?"

"What a funny little man," says Sour Puss as the taxi tears off again down the street in search of another hapless customer.

••••••••••••••Götterdämmerung #10••••••••••••

We approach the front door of one of the houses and pass a lost shopping trolley sitting in the front garden filled with empty Tennents Lager cans. Funny city Belfast – I can more or less safely tell what religion the drinkers of these cans were by the brand of lager they'd bought. By some strange but watertight logic Tennents means Glasgow Rangers, means Ulster Protestant. (The shopping trolley, on the other hand, has no significance.)

As we wait for someone to answer the door Billy pulls me aside. "Just in case anyone should ask, Markyou're Presbyterian, okay?"

Oh, shit.

"God knows who's up there, like, so it's best to stay on the safe side, all right?"

This is just great. I'm pissed to a point of total collapse and I'm being asked to enter a house where one wrong word might result in me being found dead in a rubbish skip tomorrow morning. What a night.

"I can't act Presbyterian!" I protest. "They'll know right away! I want to go home!"

"Ferfucksake, Mark, we're just going in for *one* drink and then I swear we'll go. Now, what are you going to call yourself?"

"Mark?"

"Mark's all right I suppose - not *too* Catholic sounding - but McCann isn't... Let's see, call yourself McCabe. Okay?"

"Okay? But, Billy, Presbyterians... what do they *do*?" Billy, who *is* Presbyterian, looks at me for a few moments. "I'm fucked if I know. Just look stern and don't start any conversations."

We are ushered into the house by a woman in her fifties whose face looks as if it's been exposed to long bursts of gamma radiation. I bet that's what they mean by swarthy, I think to myself. She asks us to pay five quid for the privilege of getting inside. She looks suspiciously at Sour Puss who seems disappointed with her first glimpse of the club's decor.

"If you're going to vomit, do it out the back. I don't want people messing my carpets."

Sour Puss grabs my arm for support and we follow Billy up the narrow stairs. Once again ubiquitous rave music is blasting from above. The air is choked with cigarette smoke and perhaps a hint of piss. A dark painting of Christ on the Cross by Salvador Dali hangs on the landing.

We enter a tiny room that was once the master bedroom. About twenty people are crowded inside sitting on white plastic patio chairs. The noise from the stereo in the corner is deafening. A few people turn to look but most ignore us. A teenage girl is serving vodka through a hatchway that connects to an adjoining room. A blue and red Independent Ulster flag hangs in the corner. My bowels contract.

The 'revellers' are a motley bunch. Mostly men in their late thirties they seem to all have close-shaven heads, bright red faces, denim shirts and impressive tattooing. As Billy goes across the room to get us a vodka a couple of men approach Sour Puss.

"Bout you, love. Fancy a dance?"

For the first time I notice that there are actually a few people attempting to dance in one corner. A girl with the biggest hair I have ever seen in my life is swaying from the top of her high heels while being simultaneously groped by at least two men.

"Hey, big fella, mind if we dance with your honey?"

One of the men looks at me blankly but his body posture is daring me to refuse. He looks over at Sour Puss.

"Naw, go right ahead by all means," I tell him. Sour Puss doesn't looks like she's ready to argue with him either and she is led of.

Billy comes back with the drinks. "Awh, fuck. *Thanks* Mark. I leave you to look after her for two minutes and you let her go off with some hood..."

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Sour Puss is doing a desultory turn on the dance floor. Billy and I stand there feeling awkward. I notice her tights are ripped. Maybe it's the drink but I'm feeling increasingly attracted to her.

"So what part of Belfast do you two come from?" It's the 'swarthy' woman from downstairs - now standing behind us at the door. Our exit blocked.

"I'm living over on the Lower Ravenhill, love," Billy tells her. "Mark here's from south... from county *London*derry."

"So, you're from Londonderry?"

"Yes, *London...* derry, county *London*derry," I agree, sounding like an imbecile. I have difficulty calling Derry by that other name - it comes out sounding artificial. But anything for a quiet life. Hey, let's go the whole hog and just call it plain old *London*.

Billy makes a looping motion with his finger to his head to indicate to the woman that I'm a bit slow. I give a nervous giggle and the woman frowns.

One of the men who had been dancing with Sour Puss comes over to join in our cosy little chitchat. "You're strangers around here..."

Billy shrugs. "Just out for a good time. Davey told me about this place."

Our new friend stares at Billy and then at me. "That fucker! Big fucking homo, if you ask me."

I shuffle uneasily, knock back my vodka and try to psychically beam a message into Billy's thick skull that I want to get the hell out of here; like now.

Then suddenly out of the blue: "Here, you're not a taig are you?" The guy looks straight at me.

How the hell did he find out?

Billy starts laughing madly as if the guy has cracked one of the funniest jokes he's ever heard. "You're not a taig! - that's a good one..."

"Cause I've done taigs you know. Done three

actually." He comes close and I attempt a smile.

"Shit, is that right?"

"That Virgin Mary's a cunt ... right?"

"So I hear", I agree - making sure to firmly forsake the religion of my much put-upon ancestors.

Sour Puss comes back from her dance and lifts her handbag. "Jesus, Billy, let's get out of this place. It's the most fuck-awful club I've ever been to in my life."

This honest assessment of the situation seems to lessen the tension and gives Billy the excuse he needs. "Right, love, time for us to go."

We make our way out of room with the hard bastard still giving us the eye. I try not to run. Outside on the landing we find a couple having sex against a bedroom door. The man's hairy backside is pointing straight at us. We chose to ignore them and make our way out to the street. Billy gives Sour Puss a cuddle. "Well, Mark, what do you think of East Belfast hospitality?"

I don't answer. I just want to be safely home in bed.

"So we're going to your house now, Billy?" asks Sour Puss. She's yawning. Billy mumbles something which I don't quite hear. We manage to find a taxi depot on the next street. It's nearly five am and a sickly dawn light has emerged.

As I fall asleep in the back of the taxi the driver taking us back across the river is our old friend Stephen 'The Taxi Driver' Hawking. "See that star over there on the horizon?" he says. I look and see it.

"Well, it's not a star, it's Venus."

"That's an amazing thing to think about, isn't it?" I reply being not at all sarcastic.

Sour Puss squeals with laughter and Billy looks at me like I've gone mad.

"I'm surrounded by fucking spacers." 🗞

Down-sizing kipple

Lesley Reece

The only store open past midnight in my neighborhood is the Seven-Eleven on the corner. They're open all the time, unless someone accidentally drives their car through the front of the place.

That actually happened once. I didn't hear anything, but I saw it on the eleven o'clock news. A reporter was interviewing my favorite graveyard-shift clerk, an East Indian named Bob.

"What happened?" said the reporter.

Bob pointed to the boarded-up hole where the plate glass window had been. "The man drove the car through the window and all the glass broke," he said. He looked at the camera and shrugged. Stupid reporter, his face was saying, isn't that much obvious?

"Hello Miss," he said when I came in one night last June. "Cigarettes?" He always calls me "Miss." Not once in the four years I've been buying Export A's and 64-oz Diet Pepsis from him has he asked me what my name is. I didn't have to ask his; he has a name tag.

"How's it going, Bob?"

"I don't know," he said in his practically impenetrable accent. He leaned against the cash register, shaking his turbaned head. "Life is getting very, very..." He looked up at the ceiling.

"Very what?"

Bob held up his thumb and index finger about a centimeter apart. "Life is getting very small," he said. "Small?"

"Yes," he said, pushing the green Export A box across the counter. "Still same size. But small."

Most of our conversations are similar to that one. I can't decide whether he used to teach philosophy back in whatever country it was he came from, or if he just gets bored in there at three am. Maybe he smokes his lunch; I don't know.

I knew what he meant, though. At the time, I was finishing up my last term at the University of Washington. It was killing me. My life was still the same size, but it was also limited, to three hours a day in class, three hours of sleep (if I was lucky), and two hours of work in the English Advising office. The rest of the time I spent in front of Gracie, my beloved Macintosh, writing pages and pages of Academia-speak and wondering if I was ever going to get it all done.

But I did. Two hellish weeks after my conversation with Bob, I'd turned in all my papers and done an incredibly pretentious presentation on Pain and the Gothic Aesthetic in Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls*. I was done.

At eight am on graduation day, I bussed to the University, feeling like a complete idiot in my silly hat and black bathrobe. I, and five thousand other people dressed exactly like me, filed sleepily into the Clarence 'Hec' Edmundsen Memorial Pavilion, site of the day's festivities. I made sure to sit near some fellow English majors. Our Humanities degrees may not have attracted the Microsoft recruiters, but they had given us ruthless deconstruction skills — very useful for entertainment purposes during a three-hour ceremony.

••••••••••••••••••••The Fall 1997•••••••••••••

Like when the student body president was standing at the podium, delivering the worst speech of the day. "'The hearts and minds of my community are here at the University of Washington'?" whispered my friend Diana. "What on earth is that supposed to mean?"

"Yuck!" I whispered back, "Maybe he spends too much time in the dissection room down at the medical school!"

"God, can this *get* much worse?" muttered Ariadne, who sat on the other side of me.

"At least he hasn't mentioned the Information Highway," I said.

"SSHHH!" said another graduate behind me. I turned around. On her lap, she held a teddy bear, wearing its own little silly hat and black bathrobe. I snickered at it. She frowned.

"And now I'd like to read you something I've always found inspirational," the speaker said. "It's by one of my favorite poets, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow."

"Eeeeyewwww!" said Ariadne. "Not Longfellow! Haven't we suffered enough?" Diana slumped in her folding chair. I fanned her with my program. "Shut *up*, you guys!" hissed Teddy Bear Woman.

There were so many of us that there was no way of calling out each person and handing him or her a diploma with the right name on it. Instead, we all marched in line to the stage, shook hands with the president, and were each presented with our very own purple fake-leather diploma holder, stamped with the school seal ('Lux Sit') in fake gold. I looked inside mine. There was a piece of paper that said "One Hundred Twenty-Second Commencement, University of Washington."

My diploma's supposed to come in the mail. I haven't seen it yet.

After the ceremony, I had lunch with my Aged P's at a nearby Pakistani restaurant. The Stupid Question I'd been dreading came even sooner than I'd thought, arriving with the home made pappadams and mango chutney. "So what are you going to do now, Honey?" Mother asked brightly.

Suddenly, I had a vision of Bob in his orange turban and green Seven-Eleven duster, throwing his arms wide. Life had just stayed the same size but gotten a whole lot bigger. "Uh, well, look for a job, I suppose," I said to my extra-spicy Aloo Palak. Dad caught my eye and smiled sympathetically. He has a degree in English, too.

I really was going to look for work, just not right away. I was too numb. For the next week, I sat around the house, reading essays about cyborgs, drinking thousands of Diet Pepsis, and watching terrible movies on the Insomnia Channel. Then I spent a week in Canada, where I ate mostly liquorice all sorts, drank far too much Creemore, and slept until at least 3 pm every day. Marie Antoinette would have wept with envy. After that I was nice and rested. By the first of July, I was ready to find employment.

Employment, unfortunately, did not seem ready to find me. I sent out a lot of resumes and got called for a few interviews, but didn't get anything:

"Ms. Reece, don't you think you're a little overqualified for this job?"

"Well, I..."

"Are you sure you don't want to teach?"

Or another one: "Have you had any actual experience doing this kind of work?"

"Well, no, but..."

"Are you sure you don't want to teach?"

••••••••••••••Götterdämmerung #10••••••••••••

I got the hint. Probably I should have majored in computer science like everyone else on the planet. "Cheer up," I told myself, "Your degree is good for something besides that. You just don't know what it is yet."

Yet by the third week of July, I was not only broke but bored to death. How do housewives keep from drinking rust remover? There isn't anything on television during the day unless you like *Ricki Lake*, and I'd run out of household art projects. The day I caught myself stencilling little stars on the side of my bath with a jar of gold paint and a sponge, I knew I'd have to sign on with a temporary agency.

There were dozens listed in the phone book, and with my clerical skills I could afford to be picky. I chose the one that offered me the most money. A few hours later, I was standing alone in an elevator in their office tower, on my way to the fortieth floor.

As stand-up comics have been saying for at least the last thirty years, there isn't much to do in an elevator - well, not that's legal anyway. I looked at the marble panels on the walls. Were they fake? Hmm. I touched one. Yup, not cold enough to be marble. I looked at the floor indicator, a green LED display with a reader board underneath. "Welcome to the 1000 2nd Avenue Building," it spelled out in letters that moved slowly from right to left.

That wasn't new to me - my microwave oven has almost exactly the same thing. When the time's up for whatever you're heating, it spells out "Enjoy your meal" in your choice of English, French, or Spanish. That always gives me a laugh, especially if I've only been heating up leg wax. But I've always wished Mr. Microwave could talk, like the appliances in Philip K. Dick's stories. "Don't you think you've been eating enough baked potatoes lately, Ms. Reece?" it would say, or maybe "I'm tired! Don't you *ever* use the regular oven?" That's why I jumped a mile when the elevator stopped on the seventeenth floor to admit a hiplooking younger guy in a knockoff Armani suit. Suddenly a disembodied voice was saying, "Floor. Seventeen. Going up!" It was the elevator, and it sounded truly happy to be going up, too. How totally skiffy, I thought. Life is exactly the right size in here.

At the twentieth floor, we stopped again. A curly-haired woman came running out of one of the offices, trailing a briefcase and several plastic shopping bags. She zipped into the car just as the doors started to close.

The doors immediately slid open again. "Please remove all obstructions from the doorway of the car," said the elevator.

"Oh, shut up, Elevator!" groused Curly Hair, yanking at her shopping bags.

"It always does that," said Armani Suit.

"Thank you," said the elevator, sounding very grateful. The doors closed.

I did quite well on the skill tests at the temporary agency. The next day they assigned me to a reception job, at an insurance company in an older building on the other side of downtown. This time I rode up to only the fifth floor, in an ordinary elevator, quite mute. When I found the office suite I'd been assigned to, a very harried-looking woman greeted me, then showed me to the desk I'd be sitting at that day.

It was absolutely covered with teddy bears and geese. Stuffed ones, plastic ones, shiny Mylar stickers, coffee mugs. I gaped, wondering where I could possibly put my purse without knocking something over.

"She left some pencils there on the desk," said the harried-looking woman, waving her hand at a large porcelain goose wearing a spotted

••••••••••••••••••••The Fall 1997•••••••••••••

kerchief. Pencils were sticking out of its back. Goslings, with their own little kerchiefs, were gathered around its feet.

The woman bustled off. I sat down. Dozens of glassy eyes stared mockingly at me. I almost started to cry. Instead, I threw my purse on the floor and put on the phone headset.

The phones weren't very busy in that office. Sitting there wasn't much more interesting than sitting at home watching *Ricki Lake*. I had a lot of time to commune with the dozens of little objects. I asked them why they were there. They told me their job was to brighten up the desk so their owner - the regular receptionist - wouldn't go home and drink the rust remover. By the time three hours had crawled by I was incredibly, existentially depressed. Was this why I'd given up three years of my life, and spent one hell of a lot of money, so I could answer the phone at a desk covered with crap?

At last the harried-looking woman came to relieve me for a break. I made a beeline for the nearest Starbucks. If I had to be depressed, I thought, I might as well be depressed with a nice coffee buzz. I ordered a straight double shot, ristretto, in a small cup so it wouldn't cool off too fast.

As I drained it, I tried to figure out exactly what it was about the desk that was bothering me so much. All the poor woman's little fuzzy pals were twee as hell, but that wasn't it - normally, saccharine kipple like that just makes me laugh, secretly and unkindly.

But there was just so much of it in this case. I wondered what the regular receptionist's house must look like. Probably she had a teddy-bear mailbox and a goose welcome mat. Probably there was no room to move once you managed to wedge yourself inside. Hmm. Maybe this person's life had stayed the same size - she lived somewhere, had a job, bought groceries, most likely drove a car. Yes, and because of her job - doing nothing but answering the phone all day at an insurance company that didn't get very many calls — maybe her life had become so limited that it had actually compressed itself, and was now attracting little animals the way a black hole attracts stray objects in space.

I got up and strode back to the office, feeling much better. No matter what I ended up doing for a living, I didn't have to end up like my poor, bored predecessor at the insurance company. Even if I did end up as a receptionist someplace, I wasn't going to let my life become a goose-and-bear magnet. I wanted room in my existence for talking elevators and sarcastic microwaves, even if it meant I had to wait.

That may not seem like much of a career decision, but to date it's the best one I've made. It gave me enough courage to turn down a position answering phones at a law firm where I spent most of my time secretly playing lame computer games on an ancient laptop I found in a drawer. I'd only worked there a couple of weeks before I'd mastered them all. I knew I'd be bored. It'd only be a matter of time before I started buying mugs, kitties, and Seattle Mariner pencils for my desk.

So, for the moment, I'm still working as a temp, sitting at other people's desks and answering other people's phones. That's okay, though. At least they're still other people's desks and phones instead of mine. When people ask me what I'm going to do with my degree, as they've kept doing since last June, I have the intestinal fortitude to tell them I don't know yet. But I do know it's going to be something I can stand.

And though life is still the same size it ever was, I'm comfortable. It isn't as big as it was, and it's not getting any smaller - I've made plenty of room.

Hit the North

John D. Rickett

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Tommy, your editorial *[for Götter 7]* was superb. One thing about fanzines is that you, the writers/ editors, can let your feelings hang out. The bad things, in the case of the type of things you talk of, are twofold. One is that your emotions are very likely misheard, misunderstood, or rejected as meaningless by the majority of your English and North American readers, and the other is that the majority of them, again, know nothing of that sort of situation in real life, apart from the odd newsflash on TV of stonethrowing or helicopters hovering over a suspected area...

Northern Ireland reminded me of my own childhood in London during World War II - most of them just went about their business; most of them were thoroughly decent people; most of them wanted no more than to be left alone to carry on with their lives. You poor buggers have the same problem, doubly and trebly compounded by religion, as if, for a human being, that mattered a damn. I think I probably read your stuff with more sympathy than many a younger person. Keep on trying to tell us what it's like, Tommy; it's important to get the message across to those of us who think that it is simply a religious thing and no more.

NI has the problem that we are all supposed to feel sensitive about the wishes and demands of the Roman Catholic minority despite the fact that democratic vote after democratic vote has opted for continuation of the union; Cuba has the problem that we are all supposed to feel sorry for the way the *Yanquis* have ruined their economy despite the fact that they never had an economy except that provided by *Yanqui* tourists (and maybe Graham Greene) in their heyday. You can regret the troubles in NI; you can regret them deeply. But Cuba has done no more than regress to the third world 'hubbub, confusion and filth' that it would have been without the capitalism that once drove it. People, especially people under paternalistic

socialist and secret police control, get the government they do not deserve. They 'know' that their way of life and belief is right; they expect not to have any hot water to wash their kids with, or good drains to stop the dogs tracking shit and flies into the kitchen. It is a horrible conflict between what you *know* is good for them and what they believe is good for them.

Stuff the revolution. Stuff the beliefs. Stuff religion and politics and dialectics of all types. When in the name of suffering humanity are we going to set up our state to care about people and their bloody needs, not to worry about controlling their individual beliefs?

Yours for caring anarchism, free thinking and the freedom to express it (hey, anyone in Cuba talk to you about informers or secret police or what kids are taught at school about the Revolution?)

Steve Brewster

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Mark's two tales of the horrors of drugs-testing (in issues 7 and 7.5) were excellent and frightening and should have been worth a fanwriter Nova. Re. Orange parades: I looked at the Northern Ireland Tourist Board's WWW pages to see how these spectacular annual events are being marketed but the pages merely say with elephantine tact that 'The tootling and piping goes on all summer as an array of parades and bands mark various anniversaries.' Well, that's one way of putting it. (I had a look at a few Orange-related pages at the same time, but not for long: they give off a scarifying whiff of genuine underpants-on-head-and-chopstick-in-each-nostril insanity.) A random thought: if the power stations had gone on strike, everyone who'd hoarded food in their freezers would have been a bit pissed off.

Perhaps one of *Götter's* eager readers will come up with a glorious fannish solution to NI's Troubles which can be implemented in a matter of hours and usher in a new era of peace and love. Working out latent sectarian aggression through Adams/Paisley slash fiction? Improving the tunefulness of Orange marches by getting filkers to rewrite the songs— 'The TASH Tommy Ferguson Wrote'? No, maybe not.

Some surprise at discovering that the CBSI relied on the works of Baden Powell: I wouldn't have thought that Lord B-P's ideology of moulding young minds to serve King, God, Country and the Empire (which if I recall correctly was the original point of the Boy Scouts) would go down particularly well on that side of the community. Or was the political philosophy carefully excised, with only the knot-tying and log-chopping bits remaining?

I hope that the phrase 'pigeon fancier' has the same meaning outside the UK as it does inside, otherwise some of your readers may come to entirely wrong conclusions about why a group of old men in macs should be sitting in a room with feathered animals in their laps.

I was just a bit too young to be influenced by Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*; the earliest TV show to really blow *my* mind was *The Computer Programme*, first broadcast early in 1982 (on Sunday mornings; I could just catch it if I ran home from church fast enough) and featuring Chris Searle and Ian Macnaught-Davies. I learned how to program a BBC micro by watching that. Sounds silly, but it really had a big influence on me. Anyone else remember it?

((Got up every Sunday morning to see it - even tried taping Sinclair Spectrum software from the telly using a audio tape recorder - they never worked. I have to say the programme itself hardly instilled a sense of wonder at the awesome beauty of the universe...))

Good to see that Tommy is carrying the beacon of anti-Trek activism into William Shatner's home territory. (Shitner *is* Canadian, isn't he? Not that I care much one way or the other.)

Hmm, this Cuba business. Look, Fidel's just another not-very-interesting thug like the rest of them. I'm sure Cuba's much nicer now than was under the previous regime, but that doesn't necessarily make it God's Own Country does it? Was distressed to learn that a *cucharacha* is a cockroach, though I suppose it should have been etymologically obvious. I'll never be able to listen to 'La Cucharacha' again without a shudder.

Walt Willis

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If the Drumcree incident caused you to feel the way you indicate, we in Norn Iron really are in serious trouble. I had been hoping your feelings would have rather resembled those of a Republican columnist in the Sunday Times, who regards all this anti-orange feeling as having been got up by the IRA. He says that in his youth people used to go down to the end of the street to enjoy the Orange marches for their music and spectacle, and regarded them as just as Irish as the Republican equivalent. After all, what is the orange doing in the Tricolour?

I was rather shocked by your statement that the IRA had given up everything and got nothing in return. The IRA had given up nothing and got early release of prisoners, withdrawal of troops and reopening of border crossings and town centres. They didn't give up an ounce of Semtex and retained the ability to resume the war at will, as they have demonstrated. They keep trying to be treated as the legitimate representatives of the Irish people, which they are not, unlike the elected representatives Lloyd George negotiated with in the Twenties. They are just a murder gang.

Mark McCann was interesting on Orangeism but to me underestimated its Irishness. It reminds me of the time during my service in the Government of Northern Ireland when I suggested to Ken Bloomfield that Northern Ireland should have a new National Anthem, The Sash My Father Wore, with different words in Irish for the Catholics, if the words of the original Gaelic song were unsuitable.

DM Sherwood

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Congratulations on the balls (forgiveness begged from our female readers)- watching *Cosmos* instead of going to Mass - to stand up to your mother at the tender age of 13. When I think of the fuss made in a much less religious house at the age of 41 of me

refusing to go to a superstitious rite wherein my sister's young kiddy had his notional sins washed away in the name of a baby sheep (Christening I think they call it) - shudder. Turned my stomach.

For you it was *Cosmos*, for me it was a weekly part work called *Finding Out*. Neither of us seem to have got much from the official processes and tender mercies of the Official School System. O'course we will be told it's all our fault for missing a shining opportunity. Bollocks to that!

Find Go on Ban Me priggish and easy targets. I have known some decent Trekkers. Why some of them can even be trained to eat with knives and forks.

Suppose there's a lot of valuable data in Hugh McHenry's piece and maybe I'm asking to have my food chewed for me but I'd rather he pulled his observations together in something a bit more structured. It's too much like a What I did on my Summer Holidays essay. You know I did this, then I did that, then I had a crap and I did that again.

Still worth reading, which is more than I can say for some magazines (like Plonka) Keep it up (as the actress said to the Bishop).

Steve Jeffery

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Pseud's Cornered. I loved Mark's post-modern deconstruction of the Mini-Moog (are they still making those?) in Stereolab. Come to think of it, are Stereolab still going? They did quite a neat first single, that was practically played to exhaustion on late night Radcliffe vintage Radio 1, and then I heard nothing about them. Not that I was making that much effort to keep in touch with what was going on, and in fact making an active effort to try and avoid most of Britpop' (gah) bar, say, Elastica and (some of) Sleeper. Are Echobelly Britpop? Do we care? Can they let Sonya back on TOTP again soon?

Full marks for loccing yourselves to make up a letters page. Try this again, and you might just reveal yourselves as BSFA editor material. At least this bastard has written.

Pamela Boal

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You were delivered by our somewhat erratic postman just as we were setting of to Attitude the Convention. A truly goodly event but I am still recovering, not to mention going blurry eyed trying to read and LoC all the zines handed to me.

I've heard of sleeping partners but James seems to have gone in to a coma. Wake up there James, Ireland is not beyond the reach of crazy wheel chair jockeys with a penchant for running over the foot of slackers.

((Have you heard the one about the Spanish visitor to Ireland who asked if there was a Irish phrase equivalent to the Spanish 'manyana'? He was told there was but it didn't have the same sense of urgency...))

Nice to hear of our pilgrim's progress through the weather and social mores of Canada, but come on Tommy give it a rest, we have read about your aversion to Trekkies before. If we share that aversion even less do we want repeated rants.

There are certain peoples who have a wonderful knack of entertaining us when they laugh at themselves. In that category Jewish and Irish people spring to mind most readily. Brendan Landers article is a fine example of the shaggy dog story with the joke against the teller punch line.

I find Hugh McHenry's insights into Havana most interesting, if a little confusing. He seems to be praising the regime yet condemns it by the facts of daily life.

Steve Stiles

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My own experiences in Scouting were pretty shitty. For one thing, the leaders of my own Boy Scout troop seemed to prefer winter excursions to any seasons more appropriate for camping, so I've got a lot of memories of wrapping myself up in every item of clothing I took with me and still freezing in my pup tent - of wakening in some god-forsaken hour of the morning to find that the water in my canteen had frozen solid.

Early on my parents had decided that I was far too bookish and withdrawn and had enlisted me the Cub Scouts in an attempt to socialise me. There was a Cub Scout troop meeting in the basement of the local Catholic Church and I (a Protestant back then) attended a few meeting until I was asked to leave. This came about when a few of the other Cubs made a reference to the Catholic liturgy and I responded with something like "Duh, what's that?" Before long I was surrounded by the rest of the Pack and being peppered with questions about the Catholic faith. I hadn't really thought about the difference between the religions then and was totally bewildered. When my Baptist origins were finally uncovered I was gently shown the gate. I trudged home feeling embarrassed, confused, and more an outsider than ever before. (I suppose that if this had happened in the 90s my parents could've sued, or at least gotten their charter revoked, but this was before the age of litigation in the US).

One other outstanding memory of the socialising benefits of scouting was when I was burned at the stake. I had lipped off to the scoutmaster during one of those winter hikes and he decided it would be great fun to tie me to a tree and ignite some leaves piled up to my knees while the rest of the troop looked on and cheered. I suppose he thought that the leaves were too wet to do anything more than smoke and didn't realise that under the outer pipe some leaves had actually ignited and were generating considerable heat. How they all laughed as I struggled and yelled! And that's how I became the miserable, twisted misanthrope I am today....

Lloyd Penney

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I recently read of another fan and his family having a vacation in Turkey... Franz Miklis of Austria. His short holiday report detailed how many Austrians vacation in Turkey, seeing how the Ottoman empire extended as far as Austria many moons ago. Cucumber jam is wonderful on any kid of toast. It may be Turkish, but it's also French-Canadian. As I read this, I get the feeling that Neriman felt like a stranger in her own land, with the feeling of being watched probably very real. Turkey may be an Islamic country but it seems fairly relaxed about the whole thing, which is very different form our current idea of what an Islamic country is all about. Damian's remarks about rude British tourists is what I'd say about typical American tourists.

Mark's Catholic Boy Scouts uniform sounds like a modern UN peacekeeper's uniform. I did my time in the Scouts too. At the time Canadian scouts wore a loden green uniform with a green beret and red sash for the various badges. Today, they are grey uniforms with a return to the old campaign hats. I rarely see Scouts today, even with the old Apple days. I left the Scouts because even in such a semiregimented group, kids are kids, and kids can be bastards. Baden-Powell would not be pleased.

Julia Daley

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It is the Sheffield Psychopath again.

Götterdämmerung Se7en struck a chord with all the comments on being brought up Catholic - boy, can this seriously damage your life! Horror, horror, horror! But, you know, it's far worse being brought up Catholic when you are female. You are taught from an early age (or so was my experience) that not only should you totally sacrifice and subjugate yourself for others, and preferably die on their behalf, but as a girlie your only possible reason for existence is to give birth to as many future Catholics as in humanly (inhumanely?) possible - oh joy. Oh, I almost forgot - you can clean the church as well.

((You forgot about a woman's role in mixing cocktails, cu ne?))

Andy Sawyer

((from whom we received a crappy free postcard which we presume he won after eating several bags of Hula Hoops - 'Oi!, Sawyer, No! It's not funny and it's not clever!'))

WAHF:

Evelyn (you've got to write more than that to get out of the WAHF) Murray, Dale Spiers and Ken Cheslin.

Götterdämmerung **#10**

