

# Götterdämmerung

Redux



## Introduction

Tommy Ferguson

Ten years, give or take, since the last issue of Götterdämmerung. That's not so long...

It all started with the technology – as Mark relates inside. James McKee had a brand spanking new 386 PC with, and this is the important part, a copy of PageMaker he wanted to mess around with. I had the burning drive to produce a fanzine that was, for once, legible and coherent. Mark McCann had a load of articles and ideas for many more; with the talent to make them happen. Thus was Götterdämmerung born and it carried on in this vein for many issues. James wanted to use the technology, I wanted to publish and Mark wanted to write – we all did our bits really well.

We then started to rope in a few others – Hugh McHenry, Joe McNally and Lesley Reece represent our varied contributors over the years. We also had people help us out on the production side as well; Eugene Doherty lurks in the background as usual. Eventually we put together a web site, which is still kicking around with a number of recent back issues (<http://members.tripod.com/~IrishGottter/gottter.htm>). All was trundling along nicely until the issues started to get further and further apart and the enthusiasm just waned. We never killed it. It slowly faded away.

Ten years later and I'm putting this together, with the help of Mark, James and Eugene because, well lets face it, I'm still a fan boy at heart. I really enjoyed publishing fanzines, the whole process of writing, editing and then

collating and mailing them. I enjoyed even more the responses I got, naturally – even to this day I thrill at the postman at the door. Which isn't to say I was very good; indeed, some might say I was very bad at this fanzine lark. However I knew a good writer when I read one, and latched onto Mark very early. It should be no surprise to anyone that the best bits of Götter are his.

Reading them again makes me proud of these issues – perhaps more so than my individual efforts. Yes, because their legible, well written and look relatively good... But more to the point because they represent a certain time in Belfast fandom. For a few years there was a definite scene here: fanzines, groups and even a series of conventions. Götter was at the heart of that, and the players involved made it happen. Eugene helped as well, mind...

Now we're all in our forties, have settled down, married in some cases (with kids even) and certainly settling into our comfortable spread. The first rush of publishing seems a long way off to all of us. I still dabble here and there, but there is so much more going on with all of us that fandom seems a long way off.

This, however, is a reminder of what it was once like for all of us; and apologies for the fillos, it was never a strong suit of ours...



## Scouting For Boys

Mark McCann

(Götter 8)

It was April 1981 and Bobby Sands was about to become the first of ultimately ten IRA prisoners to die on hunger strike in Long Kesh prison. The atmosphere in the country, even in our tiny village of Castledawson, was fearful and brooding. One of the hunger strikers (and the second to die) was a well-liked local man, Francis Hughes. Around the country the IRA were carrying out a series of bombings and shootings that had the intended effect of raising tensions and polarising the community.

Parents, priests and community workers were fearful that the violence was adversely affecting the children of our village – particularly teenage boys. There was a belief that the passions raised by the hunger strike would drive teenagers into the arms of the IRA. In hindsight this was not too far from the truth – many current IRA men joined up during those times.

At home my mother was worried about me.

I'm not sure how she could ever imagine her first born ending up in the ranks of the Provos. I was an insular, dour pubescent kid with broken NHS glasses, acne and a soup bowl haircut who filtered reality through the medium of science fiction. My only connection with political ideology was the pseudo-Marxism of Hari Seldon.

Nevertheless, in an attempt to stop myself and my equally morose peers taking up arms against the state, my parents and other upstanding members of the parish, press ganged the entire lot of us into that more

acceptable face of paramilitarism – the Boy Scouts.

The theory, of course, was that the Scouts would mould us into fine well adjusted members of society. Cheerful well groomed lads who helped old ladies across the road and who could whittle a piece of wood while simultaneously tying fourteen interestingly shaped knots. The Irish boys of Castledawson were about to be saved by that paragon of Englishness, Lord Baden-Powell.

I was horrified. As someone once said, an appalling vista opened up before me. You see, I already had plans for the next few months thank you very much and they didn't include many outdoor activities. I had just discovered Robert Heinlein and was about to embark on his entire NEL hardback juvenilia. My idea of nirvana was about to be ruined.

But when my mother got an idea into her head there was no stopping her and before long I found myself in full Catholic Boy Scouts of Ireland regalia. The CBSI uniform consisted of a blue shirt replete with badges, epaulettes and lanyard; smart, sharply pressed navy trousers, leather belt with a big silver buckle and penknife pouch, and shiny Dr Marten boots. To complete this man-about-town ensemble we wore a burgundy neckerchief and an electric blue beret – worn on the head at a dashing angle. My books were forcibly taken from me and I was pushed out of the house to learn formation drilling with the other conscripts in the local parish hall.



There were three leaders of our troop. The Scout Master Liam was a crusty old alcoholic who had been blackmailed into the post by the Parish Priest as a sort of act of contrition for god only knows what. His first assistant, Seamus, was a kindly, eager young man who we all took an immediate shine to. He would later be charged with gross indecency for having sex with another man in a public toilet. The last leader was Des, an ex-UDR sergeant who had undergone a huge political U-turn and was now a hard-line republican who sold copies of Republican News outside of church on Sundays.

These were the men who would shape the town's teenage rabble into model citizens. And what a rabble we were. A collection of moody, cursing, disinterested youth most of whom would, on the whole, have much preferred to have sat at home smoking Embassy Regal and watching the Dukes of Hazzard on TV.

At our very first meeting Liam the Leader informed us that we would all be taking part in a camping competition in Cork in a few weeks time. The competition, called the National Shield, involved a weekend of building things with bits of wood, living under plastic sheeting and generally getting very wet. There was a collective groan as these highlights were described to us. Being a bit of a weedy mama's boy I wanted to go home and cry. The National Shield would turn out to be my personal Vietnam.

After some hurried preparations we found ourselves on a bus to Cork. I was given Baden Powell's Scouting for Boys to read on the 350 mile journey and to be honest it was a text which for the first time inspired some enthusiasm in me for the tasks ahead. The book was full of images of fresh faced young boys laughing, climbing and running, erecting tents and carrying out grand projects such as building tree huts and rope bridges. My interest grew at this description of a mythical English childhood where decent middle class boys called James and Tim went scouting during half term 'hols' from boarding schools. There was lots of brilliant sunshine, ginger ale, friendly enthusiastic adults and far as I could tell not many gunmen and no-warning car

bombs. This was a lifestyle I was prepared to buy in to.

But then our coach arrived at the border town of Newry.

The residents of Newry were in an angry mood. Burning barricades blocked the road to Dundalk and the safety of Irish Republic. Men in balaclavas were turning vehicles away at checkpoints. It didn't look like we would be going on our smashing hols after all. However, just in time, a quick thinking Des unfurled a large Irish tricolour from his kitbag and hung it out along the side of the coach. This symbol of republicanism ensured us a safe passage through the checkpoint and out of Northern Ireland. To celebrate our success everyone began singing republican songs. It wouldn't be the first time that weekend that I would find out that getting away from the troubles involved more than just putting a geographical distance between me and it.

"Jesus, have you ever seen so much shit?"

I had to admit I hadn't. Between us we had dragged a huge 30 litre bucket loaded with two days worth of excrement across the railway halt that marked the edge of the camp and along a dirt path to the pit that had been specially dug to act as the camp's temporary septic tank. Struggling to keep the contents of our bucket from splashing over our boots we stood at the edge of this foul abyss staring down in awe at the huge pile of turds that had been gathering there now for the past week.

"I never knew there were so many different types of brown..."

Strictly speaking each time a bucket load was dumped into the pit it had to be covered with earth to stop flies gathering. But most of us were wary about actually going down there to finish the job. We could all too easily imagine the consequences if we slipped on the way down...

Jackie, my companion, poured the contents of our bucket over the edge. Its contents splashed satisfyingly in the middle of the pit.

While I cleaned the inside of the empty bucket with clumps of grass, Jackie smoked one of his Embassy Regals and absently kicked clods of earth over the shit.

It had been raining ever since we had arrived in Cork. We had been soaked as we tried to pitch our tents on the first afternoon; we had

been deluged as we tried to build our fire; and it had continued to pour on our heads as we listlessly took part in the few miserable events of the camping competition that hadn't been cancelled due to the weather. I had never been so wet in my life. My feet were damp and cold, my back was wet, my hair was matted back - held in place by a mixture of dirt, water and grease; my jeans were so soaking they felt like they weighed about twenty pounds. Even a library copy of Robert Heinlein's

Citizen of the Galaxy, which I had managed to smuggle into my rucksack with the hope of finding time to read, had been turned to thick pulp by the all pervasive rain. Not that it mattered, as I couldn't have read it anyway. My NHS glasses had been smashed during a midnight raid by members of another troop

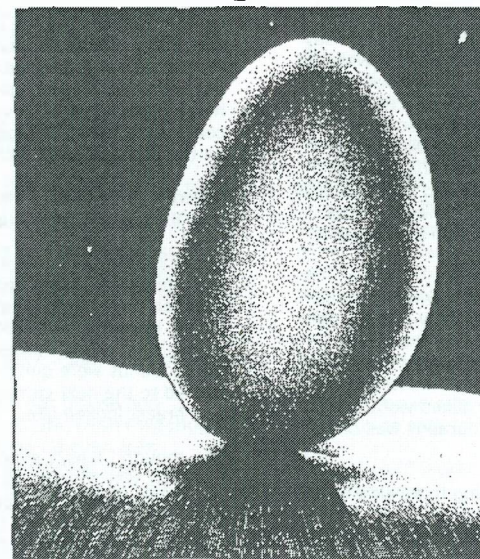
from the next tent along who had decided us Derry wimps needed to be taught a lesson. A huge figure in a black balaclava had punched me full in the face after waking me out of my sleep. I had a little homesick-induced weep to myself after this episode but was now managing to get by (though I was viewing the world through a shifting astigmatic haze).

To add to our collective grief, all that water and earth had combined to produce tons and tons of mud. It got everywhere. Everything I owned was caked in black dirt. My last haven of warmth and personal safety - my sleeping bag - had long since been penetrated with muck. The whole camp was like Woodstock without the music.

The reaction of our troop to these adversities was not exactly reminiscent of the Dunkirk spirit. We constantly bickered and fought with each other. Our leader, Liam, had given up any pretence at interest in the event. He found solace in his bottle of Black Bush and smoked

Pantella cigars while watching us from beneath his private rainproof tarpaulin bivouac. He rarely spoke to us during the two weeks in Cork, delegating much of his command to Des, his number two. Des, the born again republican, was keen on drilling and army style discipline. This seemed to

## Götterdämmerung Eight



### My patio's on fire

involve standing us in formation for quite long periods of time while he inspected our tents for contra-band. Des saw himself as the backbone of the troop - keeping us all together during those difficult times. A bit like the Alec Guinness character in *A Bridge over the River Kwai*. To us he certainly seemed to be as mad as the Alec Guinness character. I had some begrudging respect for Des though because no matter how deep the mud got, his boots were always shiny. No matter how hard the wind blew, his tie was always straight and his uniform unruffled. He had standards to maintain and by god he would see they were maintained.

My respect for him held right up until the day when, during a secret raid of his tent while he was off in Cork buying provisions, we found some of his own very special collection of contraband. Amidst piles of confiscated cigarettes and cans of Harp we discovered copies of *Fiesta* and *Penthouse* magazines. These were promptly stolen and taken back to our tent. We knew Des would never ask us about them as he would be too embarrassed to admit to their existence.

Back in the tent, faced with having to spend yet another long day under canvas due to a particularly heavy bout of rain, the stolen pornography held deep fascination for a group of mostly prepubescent boys who had never before seen a picture of a naked woman. The initial reaction to the photographs was one of horrified disgust.

"Oh, Jesus! I think I'm going to be sick!"

To me the photos were both deeply disturbing and horribly interesting. I had lead a sheltered life up until this point and just coping with being away from home was very disorientating for me. I was on an emotional knife edge as it was and could not have been less prepared for these glossy full coloured gynaecological facts of life as presented by *Fiesta*.

"I think I'm going to have a wank."

This was from Ciaran who prided himself on being a man of the world.

"A what?" Most of us were bewildered by the word. We'd heard of it all right (as in "Hey McCann, you wanker, get over here!") but we weren't too sure as to what physical act it actually related to. Ciaran proceeded to demonstrate to all and sundry what exactly was involved and the rest of us looked on in astonishment. How this activity connected to the pictures of the bony, dull-eyed women in the magazines, I could only guess at. Ciaran certainly was enjoying himself, although it all seemed a bit messy to me. That night I had some difficulty sleeping.

On the train to Cork the next day we heard that Bobby Sands had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. It seemed that he might die at any moment. This intrusion of news from home made most of us very angry. All we could do to vent this rage was to scrawl 'IRA' on the carriage seats with purple felt-tip pens.

"There's three girls in the next carriage and they'll show you their breasts for a pound."

It was Ciaran of course who had discovered the interesting young Cork girls who had boarded the train to meet up with the hundred smelly boys in smart uniforms who were camped near their homes. All thoughts of Bobby Sands were quickly forgotten as we rushed to the next carriage to find out what a real breast looked like.

Shy though I was, I eventually managed to force my way through to see what was going on. The girls were the same age as ourselves but mature well beyond their years. They slouched with splendid confidence in their compartment, blowing cigarette smoke at the bunch of nervous be spotted wimps who were their adoring audience.

"Show us your willys, you northern fuckers."

Somehow the soft Cork accent made this sound like the most romantic thing I'd ever heard. I was immediately in love.

"I bet you're all still virgins," one of them said.

She looked at me with disdain and I shrunk back terrified that she would pounce on me.

"I'm not", said Ciaran. "And I've got £7.50 left of my spending money."

He opened his wallet (which I noticed was a plastic thing in the shape of Darth Vader) and displayed his cash. The girls were immediately interested. One of them, who wore a distressed red woollen cardigan immediately sat on Ciaran's lap.

"I'll kiss you for a pound."

Faced with such blatant sexuality Ciaran retreated. "Well, I don't know..."

"Virgin!"

The girl thought for a moment and then stubbed out her cigarette.

"If you all give me a pound I'll show you my breasts."

It seemed like a good deal and within seconds a pile of sweaty Irish pound notes lay on the compartment table. The girl gathered them up and put them in her handbag.

"What about the breasts?" Ciaran demanded.

Promptly the girl undid her blouse and exposed her left breast. She wasn't wearing a bra. It was the first time I'd ever seen anything like it. The memory of that nipple was to stay with me for years. She looked around at her audience as if daring anyone to berate her assets. No one did. In fact we all stood in stunned silence; shocked and suddenly overcome with guilt. Strangely, the compartment quickly emptied. Most of us felt things had gone beyond a point it shouldn't have. Still little Catholic boys at heart.

"I still think you're all a bunch of northern virgins!"

"I hope you leave this camp with the spirit of the Scouts and Baden Powell in your hearts. I am sure you have all made new friends and

learned new things. All this will serve you well in your future lives as young adults."

It was thankfully the final day of our camp. The closing ceremony was a politico-religious affair involving an open air Mass and a lowering of the CBSI flag and tricolour. (Des had volunteered to take down the tricolour. It pandered to his republicanism.) A scout padre conducted the service. We stood in long columns in our once smart uniforms - now hopelessly musty smelling rags.

I was a mere husk of my former self. All I knew was that I wanted to be home in my bedroom reading Robert Heinlein and eating bags of Tayto crisps with my mother bringing me cups of tea. This whole affair - my personal Vietnam - I wanted to put behind me as soon as possible.

We eventually struck camp and packed our tents away into bags. Perversely the rain had stopped and brilliant sunshine had broken through. For the first times during the fortnight in Cork a few of us went for a walk down to the sea to pass the hour or so until it was time to go. The seafront was not inviting. A huge expanse of black stinking sand lay between the land and the water. We picked our way along wading through piles of rotting toilet tissue, condoms and other rubbish, trying to get to the water's edge. We were going home in a few hours and we just wanted the time to pass as quickly as possible.

"Look here!" Jackie waved us over to where he was standing.

We crowded around and I pushed through to see what Jackie had found. It was an injured seabird - a gannet or something similar. It had a damaged wing and seemed in a bad way. It hardly moved as we stood there looking at it. The bird gave a feeble squawk when Jackie poked it with a stick.

"Must have crash landed or something." Jackie told us. "I bet it has a broken wing."

The bird's black beady eye stared up at us.



"We could wrap it up in a coat," Ciaran said, "and take it back to the camp. They'll get a vet to look at it."

We debated this for a few minutes but no one could really be bothered and anyway the thing was filthy. It was covered in sand and oil.

"I wonder if you can eat seagulls?" someone asked. We'd been on a survival training course during our stay but the nutritional content of a gannet hadn't been one of the things we'd learned about.

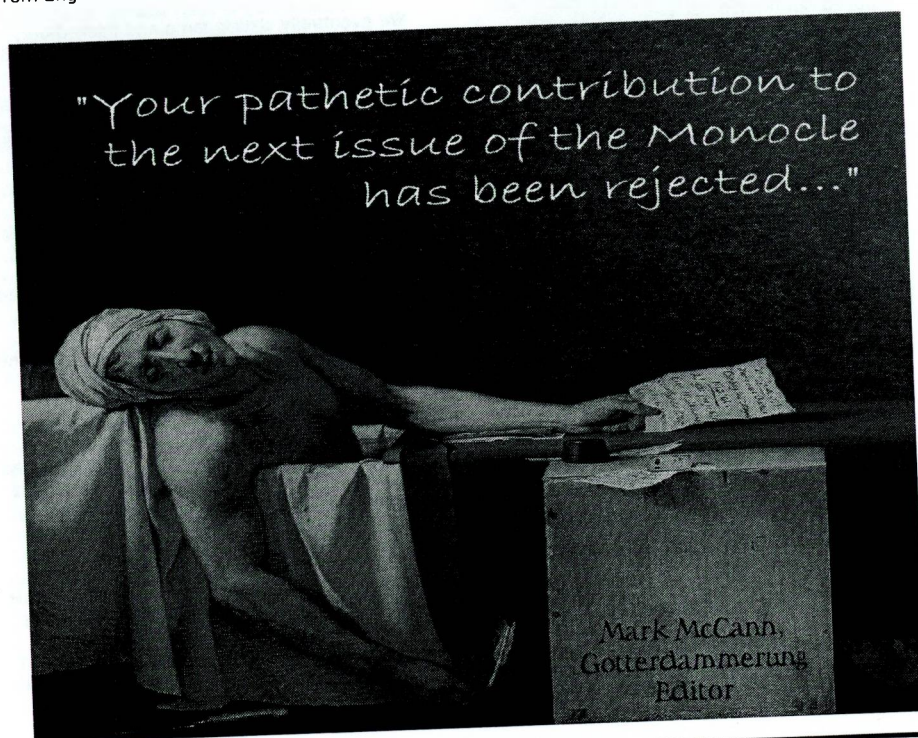
Jackie wandered off towards the sea puffing like mad on his cigarette.

"Where do you think all these condoms come from?" Ciaran asked. "I think they must be from England. Isn't that right, Mark?"

I nodded. "I suppose so." The bird tried to stand up. "Irish people wouldn't use condoms"

Jackie came wandering back with a sea-weed covered stick. "Might as well put it out of its misery." Immediately he whacked the bird with the wet stick. The bird's head was driven into the wet sand. This was a cue for the rest of us to go off and find things to beat the bird with. We took turns hammering it with rocks and sticks until finally all that was left was a bloody mass of feather, bone and tissue.

After a while we got bored and set off towards the camp. Soon we'd be going back to Northern Ireland and home to our mothers.



## Belfast nacht

Mark McCann

(Götter 4)

Despite the fanciful claims of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, Belfast does not really come to mind as one of Europe's more beautiful cities. All right, so it may have a few hugely overblown Victorian monstrosities such as the City Hall; and the odd flower basket here and there to tart the place up, but for the most part the city is something of a slag heap.

You've only just to visit areas such as the Ravenhill Road, New Lodge, Short Strand, and Lower Ormeau or, God help us, Alliance Avenue in Ardoyne, to see the true nature of Ulster's glorious capital: rubbish choked back alleys, vandalism, graffiti, burnt out cars, dog shit, and bricked up houses. (Being from the countryside, I may be being somewhat biased here).

So whenever I heard of an inner city organisation called *Better Belfast* set up to tackle urban decay I thought, now there's a good idea! And suddenly I found myself employed as an Environmental Liaison Officer with said organisation with a mission to go out there and clean up those streets.

Better Belfast has grandiose aims. It hopes, and I quote: "to assist local people in making their own community fit to live in". Doesn't sound that difficult, does it? Just hire a few of the Province's hapless unemployed graduates on a short term contract; pay them £79 a week; give them an office in the local neighbourhoods; supply them with an operating budget of two bus tickets a fortnight; and then stand back and let them get on with it.

By the luck of the draw I was given Lower Ravenhill and before I knew what hit me, I was wandering up the Ravenhill Road looking for my new office which I had been told was on Madrid Street.

Not having much success in finding the street in question I decided to ask directions of one of the locals. The first man stared through me like I didn't exist. The next guy gave me a deeply suspicious look and I began to suspect that maybe I had some kind of phallic object growing out of my forehead that was attracting such attention. I checked my reflection in a shop window. No, everything was alright there.

I turned around and saw a little old lady looking at me. She said,

"Jesus, son are you out of yer mind?"

"I don't think so", I replied trying to use my reasonable voice.

"Do you know where Madrid Street actually is?" This was a stroke of luck. Two people looking for the same street. Perhaps we could look together.

"No, I don't", I said truthfully.

"The *Short Strand*", she hissed pointing down the road. "Where the Taigs live..."

So here was my first problem. I was supposed to liaise with the good protestant people of the Ravenhill Road about their environment and use my office as a drop-in

centre. However, my office was located in catholic Short Strand - a place these people would be terrified of entering (and not without reason).

"Thanks love", I said and hurriedly made my way across to where the Taigs live trying to look as inconspicuous as possible.

I eventually found my new office situated across from Montpottinger police station - one of the worst protected police stations in the city and sitting duck to any would be blast bombers, coffee jar throwers, etc. Needless to say the rest of the houses on the street where vacant and blocked up. I could see that my place was destined to become a popular meeting place over the next months.

Inside I found the 'office' was in fact an empty terraced house with nothing but a table and chair in the living room. On the table was a note from the previous ELO. It read:

"SUCKER!"

I tore it up and threw it in the bin. Just then the door bell rang and I went to open it.

I was confronted with the muzzles of four Heckler and Koch, 40 rounds a second, fully automatic, machine guns.

"Who are you?" asked the RUC man.

"Mark McCann", I replied trying to make the name sound not too nationalist, "I'm the new ELO from Better Belfast".

I had imagines of the front page of next morning's Irish News: *Catholic man (25) shot dead in hail of bullets. Police plead mistaken identity.* "Oh, hello", said one of them. "I'm the crime prevention officer. We thought someone was breaking in. We don't get many people around here."

The policemen entered and made themselves comfortable while I put on the kettle.

Uneasily, I began to wonder if this action could be construed as aiding the security forces in their imperialist subjugation of the

Irish people. I could be branded a legitimate target and end up with a couple of liquidised knees.

With this in mind, I hurried the tea party along and made excuses that I had another meeting in twenty minutes. As the police left I checked to see if the office was being watched. Sure enough at the bottom of the street four teenagers looked sullenly towards me. Oh, shit.

But the rest of my first day passed without incident. In fact it passed without any incident whatsoever. No one called. No one phoned. Nothing. If I wanted anything to be done, I realised, I would have to go out and meet the people myself.

The next day found me at the Bridge Community Centre where I reasoned the local community activists would be hanging out. I was in luck - the previous ELO had made an attempt at setting up a group in the Bridge centre and several of its members still met. I arranged a meeting with them for later that day.

They were a group of four very large, hard looking ladies all in their mid forties; one of them with a UVF tattoo on her forearm. They were tough talking: as people have to be to survive in that area without a pot to piss in. Three children were running about the centre screaming their heads off unnoticed by the women.

The first, difficult to hear, words of the meeting were: "Well, son we all know you're a catholic but we don't give a fuck. Sure, we're all the same under the skin"

These reassuring introductions over with we got on like a house on fire.

The first thing they wanted me to sort out was the fact that in one area of the Ravenhill road everyone's bum was turning red. I tried to explain that I wasn't a doctor but that Preparation H was probably what they were looking for; but they weren't having any of it.

"It's not piles, love, it's that bloody paint factory."

The story was simple. Right slap bang in the middle of this inner city residential area was a paint and dye factory who the locals suspected of dumping paint into their sewer system. Their paint was turning up in toilets, in drains, and in sink overflows. The fumes from the stuff were giving babies rashes and affecting children with asthma.

"You couldn't imagine this sort of thing happening on the Malone Road?", asked one lady.

I had to admit that it was extremely unlikely that the middle class families of the Malone Road would put up with having rosy behinds.

Great, I thought, here's just what I was looking for. Valiant Mark, defender of the working class, battles against ruthless, non-environmentally friendly, capitalist scum. I contacted the factory and arranged a show down.

The meeting was not a success. Instead of the managing director I got the site manager who was every bit the lumpenproletariat lackey that he appeared to be. "It's not our fault," he whined. "We're allowed to dispose of our waste water into the main sewers and that's were the leak is occurring. It's the DOE's responsibility."

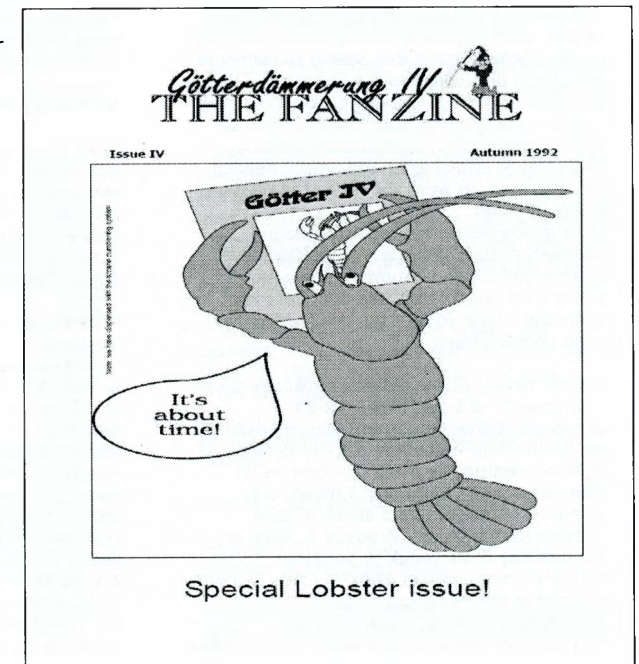
"What the hell is a dye factory doing in the middle of a city?" I asked him.

"Jobs", he replied.

And that was the end of our meeting. To tell you the truth, I never did sort out the affair of the Threat of the Rouge Arses. The complaint got caught up in the DOE's bureaucracy and so ceased to exist on this plane of reality.

In fact like the rest of the ELOs and Better Belfast in general, I never really got around to doing anything worthwhile. A few flower pots that were later smashed; a recycling drum in the shape of a Coke tin (someone else's stupid idea); and a wall mural that took weeks to paint. It was a kind of abstract affair with the Albert Clock sticking out at a ninety degree angle. Everyone thought it looked like a SAM-7 missile so we had to whitewash out it a week later.

It wasn't really our fault that we were so ineffective. My niece has a weekly pocket allowance that is the envy of Better Belfast's budget. And Belfast has so many crippling economic problems that to piss around with a few community gardens is a bit like putting a sticking plaster on an open tumour. What the place needs is jobs and not fancy government PR gimmicks.





## Christmas in Belfast

Mark McCann

(Götter 5)

The cold, dark days of Christmas are approaching rapidly and I'm starting to feel like shit. Each morning now, when I get out of bed, it's a battle with asthma - my lungs turned into lead tubes by the air of a freezing flat, and later by car exhaust fumes as I trudge wearily into work.

Belfast is a shit-hole in the winter (and now that I come to think of it, it doesn't improve a hell of a lot in the summer either). All the crap - McDonald's cartons, offy bags, vomit, dog faeces, used condoms, rotting leaves, and the general Belfast grime that seems to condense out of thin air - clings to the streets and to your feet and drags you down into the gutter. I fight my way along, past the RUC 'ring of steel'; past cursing, snot-crustied alchies, vacant-eyed bank clerks and empty-headed car salesmen, to what should be the relative safety of work.

Once inside their office most people are relatively secure. Not me. As a Kafkaesque punishment for an unknown crime which I swear I did not commit, the doors are kept open and I have to face the whole stinking heap until midday.

I'm not saying all the general public are scum - far from it. It's just that I get an unrepresentative (specimen) sample visiting my fonthead of wisdom in the city centre. All right minded people avoid city centres on Siberian Monday mornings. I mean, only someone of great mental anguish could possibly decide to visit Argos at 9.30am on the first day of the week to purchase bathroom mats and an Allen Key set. I stand amazed at the Pavlovian responses of the anti-Marxist masses. Even in these recessionary times, Belfast shops are crowded

with the worshippers of unbounded consumerism; buying rubbish which they can hardly afford and staring enviously at trash which they can't.

As I munch on a breakfast of two Snickers bar and hot sweet tea, I can barely hold down my bile at the sight of them.

I turn on the news and hear that a policeman has been shot. Killed in the Monico bar- the same bar were the Belfast sf crowd meet to hide from the wide-eyed scum.

No hiding place now.

Right there where we sat eating our tortillas, sipping our Guinness and talking shite, somebody's dad got their head blown open by a bullet. I'm sure it wasn't a pretty sight but they've it all cleaned up now and we'll be back there next Thursday to sip our Guinness again. Plus ça soddin' change...

"The situation here is easy to solve!" - my first 'customer' of the day fingers his cufflinks and smiles politely. "We take the IRA, the UVF and Sinn Fein and put them into a concentration camp and kill them all. They aren't human beings so obviously they've no human rights. After that things will be back to normal." I return his smile and, Sisyphusian-like, mouth something meek about the need for mutual understanding. He starts talking about the USA being 'nigger infested'... Who said being a liberal was the easy option.

A week later a 27 year old law student and single mother gets gunned down in the York bar - another regular haunt, once hip now gone the way of respectability. But it's all right

- you see, she wasn't a human being -she was in Sinn Fein, had purple blood, and therefore deserved all she got.

Night time comes quickly in winter and the zombies increase. My boss gets a bullet through the post and a mis-spelt warning: 'All community relations workers are now legitimate targets. Fenian bastards'. Now there's a fucking excellent piece of logic if ever there was one. I've just found out that I too am no longer a human being - looking around me at the teaming hordes it's something I've secretly suspected all along.

Gladys, my work partner sits with a pensive grin on her face. A misfit in this city of cold certainties - a southern Prodigal counting the days until she can escape back to Cork. I don't blame her. It's about as far as you can get from Belfast without swimming.

"Anything strange happen today, Gladys?"

"You mean apart from the threat against my life?," she asks.

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"You're a wreck," my doctor tells me. "Sores on your feet; asthma; sinus blockage; eczema; conjunctivitis - you need a holiday"

"I need to emigrate."

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Sitting over a lunch consisting of two greasy, stinking sausage rolls and a can of Tango I wonder whether to have a walk before the afternoon parade of hopeless cases begins. A friend calls me on the phone from London to tell me that he's just shackled up with some Bulgarian/Turkish woman.

"Great loving and she does all my washing." Sexist bastard.

"You always hated southern English people," I say, "How come you're over there now?"

The phone is silent for a moment as he thinks before answering. There's a crackle of static. Is it true that MI5 intercept all Belfast calls to and from the mainland? (Yes-Tommy)

"Let me get one thing straight, Mark," he replies helpfully. "I'm only over here to do

three things: to take their jobs; spend their money; and fuck their women. It doesn't mean I have to like the bastards." Charming.

Just then a bomb goes off two hundred yards from the office door. The front window rattles but doesn't break. Rather than get up from my meal I turn on the radio to hear the glorious news that IRA have successfully bombed a travel agents shop. The list of legitimate targets grows ever more surreal...

The blast doesn't seem to affect the mindless shopping hordes outside though. They continue staring through the windows of Ratners and Dixons caring little that twenty-seven women are at that moment being taken to hospital. All that matters is that special 25% off and 0% APR. They have difficulty moving out of the way of the speeding ambulances.

Another customer enters. A middle age man looking slightly the worse for wear. He drops himself down onto a seat beside me.

"Jesus fucking Christ, son. It's a fucking hard slog. I don't know if I'll make it. This place has gone to the fucking dogs."

I hate to admit it but he's probably right. He has the faintest hint of an American accent. His breath is soaked with hard liquor and I feel kind of sick after my sausage rolls. I notice his left eye is dilated and the right fully open. He has a sickening cut under his right ear that looks infected.

"I'm up in the Morning Star hostel," he explains. "The wife threw me out. Too much of this." He plunks a gin bottle on my desk. "Fuck this town, anyway."

He gets up and puts the bottle back in his pocket.

"I wish I back home in New Jersey."

He leaves the office and heads off in the direction of the bomb blast.

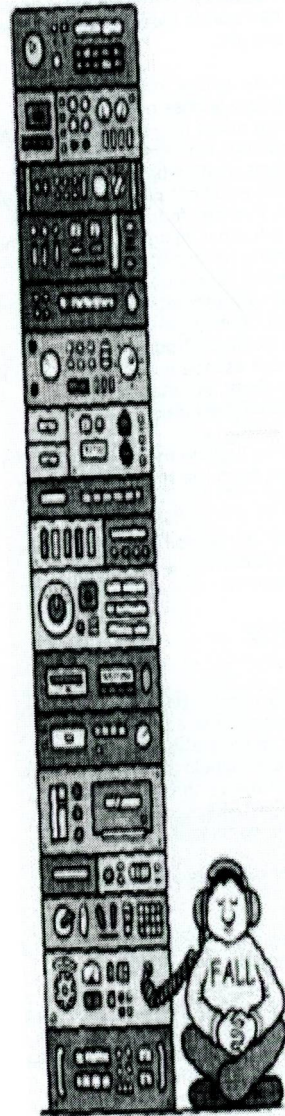
After work I'm standing in Lavery's bar trying to find some space to exhale. So they tell me I

have to write an editorial for Götterdämmerung. Something less polemical and a bit more upbeat this time. You fucking Irish are always whinging about the 'Troubles'. This is a shaggin' sf fanzine not Fortnight. Let's here about fannish culture in Belfast. What do you lot do at nights? Filking?

Well, apart from ducking for cover, not much.

Guzzling some fluid that's trying to pass itself off as a half a litre of Budvar, I give a sigh of relief over the fact that my job is only certain for another eighteen months. It's quite unsettling trying to plan a career around other people's hate for each other and it's something of a comfort knowing it's only going to last so long.

Much later, I trudge home; throw off my gunge-covered suit and run the bath. While soaking in it and listening to Charlie Mingus I hear kids outside setting off illegal fireworks. It sounds like civil war.



## Down size kipple

Lesley Reece

(Götter 10)

The only store open past midnight in my neighbourhood 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 favourite 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 him; 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 centimetre 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.

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 favourite 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?"

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 hip-looking 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 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

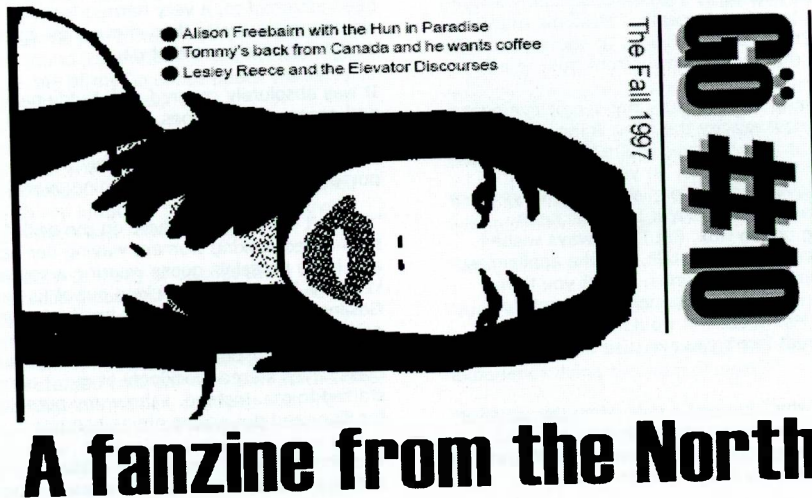
than sitting at home watching *Ricki Lake*. I had a lot of time to commune with the dozens of little objects. I asked them why they were there. They told me their job was to brighten up the desk so their owner - the regular receptionist - wouldn't go home and drink the rust remover. By the time three 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.





## El Cucharacha Cubana

Hugh McHenry

(Götter 10)

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 kaka...* 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 'semi-conventional' 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, 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<sub>2</sub>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 home-made 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 tippie. 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').



## Ain't going to Goa

Mark McCann

(Götter 11)

"You are the whitest fucking person I have ever seen in my life."

I was standing in the back bedroom of our guests' home. Their eldest son, a twenty-year-old bass player was examining my, admittedly very pale, hand with total amazement. He was taking such an interest in it I thought I was never going to get it back again.

"And you are the blackest fucking person I have ever seen in my life," I replied.

When my friend Hugh translated this into Spanish everybody fell about laughing and it became yet another excuse for all of us to have another shot of home-made rum. The stuff burned my throat and made my eyes water as I tried to force it down. At \$1 a bottle it wasn't exactly a quality product but it seemed a good way to cement international race relations.

The room we were in was tiny. A double bed and a huge wardrobe took up most of the space. I managed to retrieve my white hand and find a space on the bed next to the grandmother of the family. She sat there, a smile on her face, wearing a platinum blonde wig and gold cocktail dress. Every so often she would grab the closest man for a rib-crushing hug. Still sleepy from jet lag I found myself nodding off against her shoulder. The heat and humidity in the room was indescribable. Sweat rolled down my face, my tee-shirt stuck to my back. I felt I was suffocating.

It was my first evening in Havana and we'd been invited to *Casa de Ya-Ya*, a weekly get-together of Cubans which takes place in the

tiny first floor flat of a huge 19th century tenement building in *Havana Vieja* (or Old Havana). Despite the strange surroundings the event reminded me of the ceilidhs my family and their relatives used to have when I was young. Friends and neighbours would come around to sing songs, recite poetry and get smashed on whiskey and bottles of Guinness. The difference here was the Afro-Caribbean *son* music that was being played was of far higher quality than the drunken Irish traditional squawk once produced by my relatives.

The whole flat was crowded with people who jostled for space with strange *santería* voodoo dolls which stood all around. There was even one constructed from a shop window dummy that I kept mistaking for a real person. The dolls are representations of Nigerian gods and goddesses but seemed also to be influenced by Catholic saints. These too reminded me of home – equivalents of the statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Sacred Heart of Jesus that litter every living room in Ireland. Centre-stage here in the flat though was a beautiful, almost religiously iconic, painting of Che Guevara. A smaller photograph of Fidel sat on a shelf nearby. Looking at them I realised for the first time that, shit, I really was in Havana.

including *Michael Collins*, *Hear My Song* and *The Commitments* and it seemed that most Cubans based their ideas of Ireland with reference to these films. Quite often over the next couple of weeks when we explained to people that we were Irish they would go: "Ah!! The Blacks of Europe!" and then clap our

backs in solidarity. I've got to be the whitest black man in history.

"You Irish are a proud nation. You fight for your freedom. Ireland is just like Cuba. I respect you very much."

For a few seconds I debated with myself whether I should try to explain the intricacies of the Irish Troubles to her but then I thought, why shatter the respect of a beautiful exotic woman who I've only just met? Keeping silent I got a hug and kiss for my brave efforts to throw of the yoke of British imperialism.

### Bad haircut

We were climbing over a memorial to American sailors blown up on the USS Maine during the Spanish American War. It was about 3am and I had suddenly fallen in love with Havana. All along the seawall of the *Malecón* Cuban couples and groups of friends sat drinking rum, listening to salsa and watching the world go by. We were stopped constantly by people trying to sell us cigars, marijuana or who just wanted to talk with tourists – still quite a rare breed in this city. A group of gay men started hissing at me and I wondered yet again if my new cropped haircut was just a wee bit too much the wrong side of camp. "Come and talk!" they called.

Five years ago and a gay man would have been sent to a 'rehabilitation' centre somewhere in central Cuba. Now, after a lot of public debate about homosexuality, it's suddenly acceptable – almost chic – to be queer in Havana.

During my whole time there I'm constantly amazed at how amicable Cubans are about almost everything. To take one obvious example, I'm sure there is racism in Cuba but as an example of relative racial harmony I can't imagine there are many other places like it in the world. Coming from Ireland where black people are very, very rare it's overwhelming to see such a rich mixture of black, mulatto, Chinese and white people living life cheek by jowl. Belfast will seem so boring after this.

When I was telling this to a friend later she said, "Well, surely they don't like *Americans*." But that's not even true either. Despite the US's attempts (now to be lifted) to stop its citizens from travelling there, American tourists do make their way to Cuba and are welcomed with open arms. Just don't try telling Cubans how to run their own country or you'll be looking down the wrong end of an AK-47.

Tired of walking we get a lift home from a drunken Lada driver who swerves from side to side along Avenida 5 until we reach the Miramar district where Hugh lives. Miramar is all Spanish villas, banyan trees and foreign embassies. We get out in front of the new Republic of Congo's embassy (which looks deserted despite all the lights being on and all the windows opened wide) and try to find Hugh's apartment block. Mosquitoes are darting about my knees. There has been a power cut and the streets are in darkness. A policeman playing with his Russian 9mm pistol gives us a wary look. Hugh says "Buenos" and the cop smiles.

We eventually find the right address on the corner of Calle 21b but not before I almost break my neck. At every street corner in Miramar there is a three metre deep storm drain. Almost all are missing their concrete covers and are instant death traps. Walking in the dark it's easy to do oneself a serious injury.

### Loo with a view

We get 'dressed up' for a meal in the new restaurant on the top floor of *Edificio Focsa*. The *Focsa* is a thirty storey apartment block built in the 1930s and it's safe to say that it has probably seen better days. It immediately reminded me of Divis Flats in west Belfast. It's a dark, sweaty place and most of the apartments are now vacant. Lengths of steel cable hang from crumbling concrete. Every apartment is missing its air-conditioning unit. The empty slots look like gaps in a rotting smile. About seventy hardy souls continue to live there (including at one stage my friend Hugh and his girlfriend Selma who did battle there with infestations of cockroaches and



mosquitoes for a whole year (see *Götter* #10)).

Anywhere else and the *Focsa* would be a haven for crime and drugs - but not in Havana. Here every neighbourhood has a branch of the CDR, the Committee for the Defence of the Revolution. Like a lot of things in Cuba it's a much less disturbing concept in practice than it is in theory. The CDR is part DIY secret police, part neighbourhood watch, part community group but mostly just local busy-bodies. You usually see committee meeting taking place on the steps of an apartment block around 7pm during the week. The CDR keep an eye on absolutely everything. Needless to say if you were to get up to any monkey business in the *Focsa* you would get a visit from the ladies of the CDR.

Despite the *Focsa's* obvious state of distress the Cuban government decided to put a fancy French restaurant on the top floor which you can ascend to using an elevator at the rear of the building (you enter through a plush foyer thus avoiding all the nastiness at the front). When you emerge into the restaurant you suddenly understand why it's here. The *Focsa* is the tallest building in *Havana Vedado* and the view of the city at night is spectacular.

We can see all the way to the *Plaza de la Revolución* in the south with its impressive José Martí memorial. To our right is the *Riveria* and *Capri* hotels - former hang-outs for Al Capone and his cohorts. To the left and far below is the beautiful *Hotel Nacional* - German tourists can be seen bopping at its poolside disco. Right below us is Avenida 23 known to the locals as *La Rampa* - centre of Havana's nightlife. From this perspective it's easy to miss the ruined ramshackled buildings that make up most of the city.

For the first time in Cuba I feel underdressed. I'm in a dirty tee-shirt, sneakers and jeans which normally are de rigueur for most places in Havana but I'm surprised to find people here in dinner jackets and shirts and ties. The waiters don't seem to mind though and show us to a table. We fight over bread rolls and devour them with gusto. For the past week

we've survived on rolls bought with pesos from the local *bodega*. I only

realised after a few days that the crunchy, interestingly textured black things in the *bodega* rolls were cockroach legs. I'm relieved to find that the *Focsa's* rolls do not have this source of added roughage.

The rolls remind me of a trip Hugh and I made to the *bodega* the previous evening. We met two women on the way there and talked to them for half an hour before eventually making our way into the city in search of our rolls. They wanted us to take them to the disco in the *Riveria* that night but we said no. We needed food. An hour later on our way back to the flat I heard someone screaming 'Marco!, Marco!' and I turned around to find these two beautiful women chasing us down the street. I could feel my ego exploring new heights. I had turned down a night out with a Naomi Campbell look-alike for the sake of some cockroach-infested bread rolls - and here she was chasing me - she wouldn't take no for an answer!

When they caught up with us they explained that they were desperate to go to the toilet and wanted to use the one in our flat. As they said this they both groaned and crouched on the ground grabbing their groins to demonstrate their predicament. Their acting was first class. It seemed like their bladders were about to explode.

"We'd better let them come with us," I said to Hugh but he wouldn't hear of it.

"This is just a trick, Mark. They'll come back to the flat, drink all our rum, spend the next six hours dancing and then demand to sleep with us."

I thought this over for about half a second. "And there's a *problem* with this?"

Hugh shrugged. "Well, you have to question their motives, don't you?"

"We do?" I said, trying not to sound too exasperated.

After prolonged debate we half-heartedly told the women that they would have to pee behind the hedge and we would keep watch. At first they weren't very pleased but laughed as we averted our gaze. "You Irish are strange!" Damn right, I thought, as they danced off into the night.

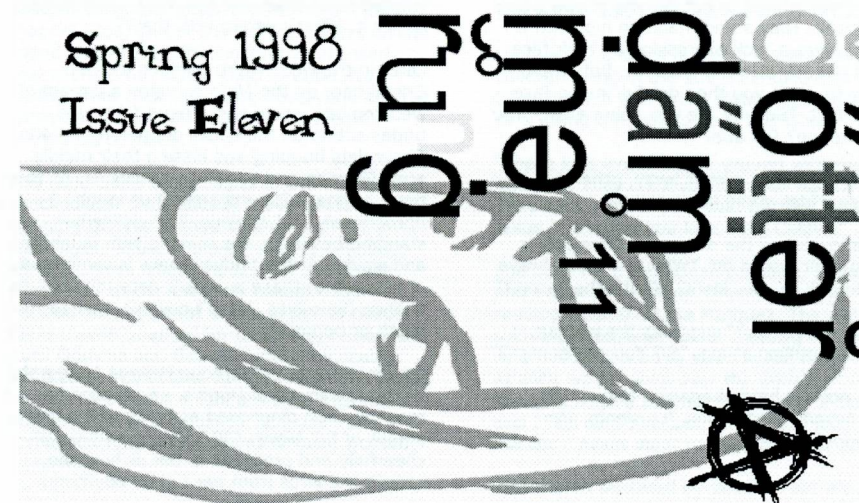
"We're doing this for Fidel," Hugh explained to me. Our mood on the way home was subdued. "What would he think if he knew we had exploited those poor women?" Later as I chewed on my cockroach leg I wondered what Fidel Castro had ever done for me. I seemed to have replaced my Catholic Guilt Complex about sex for some kind of Fidelista version.

The meal at the *Focsa*, cooked by a real French chef was exquisite. I had onion soup for starters followed by fresh lobster - the first time I've ever had (or could afford) *langusta*. With ice cream to follow and an almond liqueur to finish the whole thing came to a laughable \$20. (The liqueur was '*por la casa*' or on the house.) As I paid up I reflected that

an ordinary Cuban, if he or she is lucky, might get a salary of \$20 a month and would be horrified that someone could spend such an amount on one meal.

I couldn't help feeling guilty about the whole thing but then I told myself that what I was doing was simply transferring money which I had earned back in the UK (while working for the British government) straight into the coffers of the Cuban government - and, what's more, I was getting some good food at the same time. Eating lobster for the revolution! What a working class hero! Why, even Raul Castro would be proud of me.

Before leaving the *Focsa* I visited the bathroom and was rather impressed to find the toilet bowl was right next to a huge window overlooking the *Malecón*. The window ran from floor to ceiling and as I sat having a crap I could see people out on the streets, sitting in their apartments, swinging at the disco in the Hotel Nacional. It's the most public bowel-movement I've ever had in my life and quite a satisfying piece of exhibitionism it was too.



## On the Ramp

We come down to earth very quickly. Emerging from the air-conditioned pleasantry of the *Focsa* restaurant we stumble out onto *La Rampa* – Havana's hippest street. It's the early hours of the morning but the tropical heat is unrelenting. The place is crowded with people. Broken (and live!) electricity cables are everywhere; huge potholes threaten your every step and street lighting is non-existent. The air is filled with cigar smoke, the smell of rum and sea spray coming up the 'Ramp' from the Caribbean. We dodge between Pontiacs, Buicks, and 1970s Ladas. A huge 'Metro Camel' roars past us crowded with people on their way home. The 'Camels' are an ultimate symbol of Cuban adaptability – Russian tank carriers, obsolete since the end of the cold war, now fashioned into frighteningly huge buses to help deal with Havana's demand for public transport.

I get grabbed by beautiful *jiniteras* every few yards along the street. Their conversations are good-natured and they are amazed at the whiteness of our skins. Cuban women have a disconcerting habit of not looking at you when they speak. They stand, hand on hip, with a couldn't-give-a-fuck expression on their face gazing intently into the distance. But when you try to leave you then get full in-the-face eye contact. "So why are you going away? You don't like me? *Por que?*"

Reluctantly I drag myself away, otherwise I suppose, Fidel would be pissed off.

As it is Hugh and the others are themselves getting a bit pissed off. "Why is it they always want to talk to you, Mark? What's the secret?"

"Maybe you're gay?" suggests the woman who's still pulling at me. "Si? You prefer men?"

Jesus, not the haircut again! I think. "*iNo habla Español!*" I tell her. "*Lo siento. iNo entiendo!*"

She makes some sign language which quickly assures me that conversation was not going to be much of an issue in our relationship. She then says something which Hugh translates.

"She wants me to tell you that the best way to learn Spanish is in bed."

But we walk on.

Coming from the icy desexualised wastes of Northern Ireland, Cuba is a bit of an eye-opener. Sex seems to be the national pastime – which I suppose is not surprising because it's the one thing that's not rationed (along with condoms). You have to be careful not to look too closely behind any hedge or in a doorway at night in Havana because there's always people at it no matter where you go.

A lot of Cuban women see tourists as a potential way of escaping the poverty of their country and as a tourist you're always getting the attention of *jiniteras* who may or may not be prostitutes – the terms are not completely synonymous in Cuba (*jinitera* means 'jockey'). One person said to me when talking about this: "Diana Spencer was a *jinitera* but she wasn't a prostitute. You understand? She wanted to be queen so she slept with Charles to get it. What's wrong with that?"

Later in the week we're drinking ice cold Cristal beer on the *Malecón* when a stream of wedding cars zoom past. Beautiful young brides sitting on the backs of open top 1940s Chevrolets hugging and kissing their middle-aged German and Canadian husbands. As they pass, ordinary Cubans around us laugh uproariously and applaud. Two policemen standing beside us are shaking with laughter and waving at the brides. There is some kind of respect for these women's determination to change their lives. I don't now whether to laugh or be upset.

On the steps of the famous *Havana Libre* hotel we meet a friend of Hugh's – a girl who has recently been diagnosed as being in the first stages of full-blown AIDS. She greets us all cheerfully and proceeds to tell us how she caught the virus from her Cuban boyfriend.

She is careful to explain she didn't catch the virus from a tourist.

"Those Chinese condoms are rubbish. Always use two," she advises us.

Cuba has some of the most advanced AIDS research hospitals in the world but has no money to pay for the kind of drug regime that might help this girl. "Anyway," she says, "the Americans won't allow the proper medicines through." She's wearing a tee-shirt of Fidel embracing Pope John Paul II and is laughing loudly as we walk off home.

## At the beach

*Playa del Este* is about ten miles from central Havana. Seven miles of unbroken beaches that run from the eastern tip of the city. The beaches are as popular amongst Cubans as they are amongst foreign tourists. Four of us set off early in the day equipped with factor 20 sun lotion and sensible hats. We flag down a Lada in the street and the driver tells us he'll take us to the beach for \$10. We drive into the tunnel which runs under Havana's harbour and emerge in the eastern suburbs. Here the Spanish villas are replaced by ugly, dilapidated eastern European tower blocks. Hugh tells us that his boss, one of the top translators on the island, lives here. I'm constantly surprised that there is no middle class in Cuba. No matter what their occupation everyone has the same basic standard of living. No Ikea for thousands of miles...

The Lada takes a back road to avoid police checkpoints. Theoretically it's illegal for ordinary drivers to take fare-paying passengers and our driver is being cautious, although from what I've seen of the Cuban police they seem relatively casual. Fidel decided long ago that it was better to police Havana with *guajiras* (or peasants) recruited from Granma and Guantánamo provinces in the distant east. Hard-working men who would be impressed with a cool uniform, night stick and gun and who would be less open to corruption. The policy seems to have worked quite well.

Our driver, despite his illicit taxi driving activities, is a strong Fidel supporter and fought to repel the Bay of Pigs invasion. He's upset at the move to capitalism which Fidel has begrudgingly instigated and which, although is slowly unfreezing the Cuban economy, is already creating a nation of Haves and Have-nots. There's a feeling that Fidel has let loose something that not even he will be able to control.

Most Cubans we met seemed in two minds about the benefits of democracy. They look to Miami in the north and see the affluence (although black Cubans look to the north and see nothing but the racism). But they can also look west to central America and east to Haiti and south to Colombia and wonder which country Cuba is going to resemble most after twenty years of neo-liberal capitalist democracy. They know it is unlikely to become a small version of the USA.

Earlier that day we spoke to a friend who had just returned from Guatemala City where he stayed for a weekend to renew his Cuban visa.

"I was never so glad to get back to Havana," he tells us. "Leave your hotel after dark and you will be killed. It's almost a certainty."

He tells us, and his horrified Cuban friends, of children living in the streets addicted to glue. Of policemen who drive around in unmarked cars killing the kids to keep the streets 'clean'.

"These kids live in waste ground with the dogs and rats. They'd kill you for your watch. They'd kill you for your hat, for fuck sake! Jesus, it'd make you love Fidel Castro."

The beach is a Caribbean paradise. A *son* band plays under the palms. Beautiful women sit reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The water is such a perfect blue colour that any Irishman who has ever tried to swim in the north Atlantic would weep over the injustice of it all. We grab a spot, pop open our cans of beer and I feel as if I've just been injected with valium. I never want to go home ever again.

We're soon pestered by *jiniteras* but it's more relaxed here on the beach – more like the



women are just there to take the piss out of us. People just want to laze about and watch the sea. The girls come and go. James buys everyone bottles of Coke. Lying in the sea I think to myself that this must be heaven.

At sundown we drag ourselves away from the water. We are amongst the last stragglers on the beach and are joined by the *son* band who start playing 'Guantanamera'. We all dance around in the sand - the women showing us how to salsa. Our group has expanded to ten people, all of whom want to go partying. I'm embarrassed to find I've been grabbed by a girl and her mother who want me to go to *Havana Centra* to make me dinner.

A huge row erupts with various taxi drivers who sense that there's a lot of money to be made from these ten people. We are tugged from Lada to Lada before eventually someone in a huge Buick offers to take everyone home in his car. We pile in with room to spare and set off towards the sunset listening to Mexican salsa. I have never been more happy in my life.

On the final evening at José Martí airport I'm trying to think of the one occasion which summed up my trip to Cuba. Perhaps it was the moment when I was walking with James along Avenida Neptuno in Havana Vieja and we were surrounded by people on bicycles, on foot and in cars and suddenly somebody started shouting my name from a third storey window. I looked up and saw a young man who I don't think I'd ever met before in my life waving at me. I waved back and he grinned. A moment later he was gone. Who was he? God only knows but somehow, in a city which has two and a half million inhabitants, it didn't seem strange to bump into a friend in Havana. Despite being the most alien environment I've ever been in I've felt more relaxed there than I have been in most parts of my home city.

It may be just the ramblings of a naïve drunken tourist but I really did feel that visiting Cuba helped remind me that, despite all its inadequacies and its sheer unworkableness, there are some things of value in a socialist system - some kind of

feeling of community and social cohesion - that I certainly don't find in south Belfast (or, for that matter, south London). I suspect western capitalist democracies have thrown the baby out with the bathwater. Whether it's worth losing it for the sake of a chance to purchase your own BMW Z3 is open to question.

One Saturday night we went to the disco at the Teatro Karl Marx. The place was jammed with Cubans, there was no air-conditioning, the sound system was so loud it was physically painful and there was almost no lighting. We went there with an ex-Liverpool docker called Billy. An unrepentant Stalinist he'd retired to Havana and now coaches Havana FC. It cost us the equivalent of 5 pence to get into the disco and within seconds we were po-going about to Chumbawamba.

So there we were: four Irish people, an English Stalinist and two hundred Cubans jumping up and down and singing as if our lives depended on it: "I get knocked down. But I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down. I get knocked down. But I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down."

I'm sure Fidel and Raul would have been proud of us that night.

### Back to Reality(?)

Thirty-six hours later and I was in Leeds for Corflu UK. I was disorientated, I had stomach cramps (and possibly stomach parasites) and I couldn't answer any of the questions in the quiz. I spent the evening drinking my duty-free Havana Club rum and wondering just how quickly I could save enough money to get back to Cuba. After all I never did get around to visiting any museums. .



## Corflu UK

Mark McCann

(Götter 11)

James and I arrived at Gatwick on the Thursday of Corflu after a twelve hour flight from Havana. The first thing we noticed on arrival was that the bastards had changed the name of Opal Fruits while we were away.

"That's the last time I go away for so long," James exclaimed. "God knows what they'll do next time."

We spent the day trying to get some clothes washed and then getting some calories back into our bodies (pints of strawberry milkshakes from McDonalds and Mars Bars from the local newsagents) before crashing for the night on the floor of a friend's living room in south Croydon. I got caught up in a fit of exhaustion-induced hysterical giggling as James warned me that he would "probably be tossing all night as the floor was so hard". (fnarr, fnarr).

We made our way to Leeds on Friday afternoon - almost missing the train as James was trawling music shops in central London looking for some obscure Aphex Twin remixes of 'Elvis Goes All Country & Western'. (I still think someone was taking the piss.)

I slept for much of the journey half-listening to Mark and Lard on the personal stereo. They played the Manic Street Preachers 'Design for Life' which, for some kind of messed up Jungian reason, I was fated to hear everywhere I went when I got to Leeds. The spectre of Tommy at the feast perhaps? I kept drifting in and out of sleep and each time I woke I expected to find myself somewhere over the mid-Atlantic. Gazing blearily and

uncomprehendingly out at Peterborough station I mentioned to James that I thought the plane was flying awfully low. "You can almost see the people's faces." James looked at me as if I was mad.

We got to Leeds at about 4.30pm to find the receptionist in the Griffin Hotel tittering over our booking forms. It had probably been unwise of James to mention under 'Special Requirements' in his form that he wanted mounting brackets fitted in his room for his S&M equipment.

"It was only a joke, you know," he kept saying - meekly.

The lobby of the hotel had various American-style fans milling about but, never having been to a con before, we weren't too sure who anyone was. Registration still had not taken place and no one was wearing an ID badge. And, anyway, I had other things on my mind at this point. After so long without food the strawberry milkshakes and Mars Bars were having an unfortunate effect on my alimentary canal and I was in serious need of a toilet.

After an hour in the loo I realised I was also in serious need of a half litre of Kaolin and Morphine mixture and decided to make a dash across the road to Boots. The young woman in the queue in front of me was, strangely, also requesting Kaolin and Morphine. I prayed she wasn't going to buy up the last of their stock.

"Are you an adult?" the counter assistant asked me.

"Ehh?" I said, thinking I'd misheard.

"You're an adult, right?"

"Well, I suppose so..." I said carefully - honestly not sure if this was some kind of trick question. "What do you mean exactly by... adult?"

Seemingly unwilling to take the conversation in a philosophical direction he sold me my bottle of K&M without further comment. I refrained from drinking the stuff on the spot. My fellow diarrhoea sufferer gave me an encouraging smile as she left. While in Boots I left my Cuba photos in to be developed.

Back at the con James and I sampled a shot of our secret Con weapon - several bottles of 40% proof Havana Club. The stuff was dangerously smooth so we had to hide the bottles in the wardrobe to keep it out of harm's way. On our way to the hotel bar I wondered to myself how the K&M would interact with the rum.

"We've got to pace ourselves," James warned. "We're still jet-lagged."

Downstairs things were pretty much as before - Americans milling about in the lobby but few people in the bar. We ordered pints of Beamish Black and fell into conversation with Steve Swartz and Jae Leslie Adams. There were other people about who I suspected I might well know by name but whose faces were a mystery. James and I tried to guess who was who (and failed miserably - we had Greg Pickersgill down as a definite American).

Falling in behind Jae we ventured up to the registration room where Nigel Rowe informed us that he had heard by email that my lodger, Tommy Ferguson, had just started a new job back home in Belfast.

"The jammy bastard." James and I both exclaimed simultaneously. If I was disorientated before then you must understand that this news really cut me lose. Tommy in a job! Jesus, it seemed totally unfeasible. What next? Alison Freebairn not turning up for the con?

"Alison Freebairn's not turning up for the con," Ian Sorensen told us as we got our ID badges. Oh dear.

At this point we met up with Eugene Doherty - also from Belfast - who was doing Corflu on the cheap and was planning on crashing in our bedroom. I showed him to the room and presented him with the \$1,200 worth of Cohiba cigars that I'd successfully smuggled out of Havana for him (incidentally risking ten years in a Cuban prison).

"Cheers, Mark," said an underwhelmed Eugene. "I'll get you a pint later."

We got a sudden craving for Mexican food at this point and shouted at Ian Sorensen and Linda Krawecka (among others) for directions to the nearest Mexican restaurant.

"Ask Debby Kerr," they all said but she was bugger-all use. (And she calls herself a Leeds Tourism officer! - I ask you.)

We found the Mexican place by ourselves - we sort of just wandered up the street and there it was. On the way we made a point of stopping to harangue Alison Freebairn on the telephone for not attending the con. She was polite about it.

The Mexican place was excellent. We were treated to the spectacle of four Leeds girls in tiny (I mean *tiny*) dresses engaged in a cat-fight with three waitresses. The girls were eventually ejected after some impressive pushing and cursing, with the waitresses whooping and giving each other high fives when the battle was won.

"Cool!" said Eugene. "All this free entertainment and we haven't even ordered yet!"

"Remember folks - we're in Nigel E. Richardson country now," said James in a hushed voice. "Things are different here."

Eugene and I gazed reverentially around at young women in knee-length boots and sexy nerd glasses. "My God you're right. We are in Nigel E. Richardson country." Things got even

better when we were presented with pitchers of what looked like window cleaning fluid mashed up with ice. "They're called Margaritas, Mark," Eugene told me. "Try a glass."

**(Reader, the following twelve hours are a total Martin Smith-esque blank.)**

The next morning Eugene managed to wrangle a breakfast from the hotel kitchen staff despite not being a guest. I was feeling very, very sick and promised myself I'd not drink again unless it was absolutely necessary. I was kind of upset with myself for having carelessly lost the first night of Corflu. I had even slept through the wacky quiz.

We met Shelia Lightsey and Victor Gonzalez at this point (although James informed me I'd already met Victor the previous night when he gave me his fanzine, Squib.)

I was then told I was on a panel talking about Drugs and Fandom - specifically I was to talk about the 'British and Drugs'. (This is despite the fact that I don't really do drugs and don't really consider myself British... much - but whatever.)

While waiting for the panel discussion to begin I went to collect my photos from Boots. I sat in the bar with a Diet Coke and looked through them. This was a bad idea. I'd been feeling really fed-up since leaving Havana and these photos suddenly confirmed by deep suspicions that instead of feeling 'fed-up' I should instead be feeling deeply, deeply depressed that I wasn't back there. I have never before been so disconsolate that a holiday was over and knew I'd have to make a big effort if I was to cheer up again before the weekend was over.

I rambled a bit in my first ever panel discussion but luckily Ted White and Sheila Lightsey were there to tell lots of funny anecdotes. And I got a free pint of Fosters for my mild effort.

Back in the bar I met Nigel Richardson, Alun Harries and Nigel Rowe and we all tried to be extremely cool with each other. After failing to do so successfully I instead took out my

holiday photos and showed off lots of shots of myself with beautiful Cuban women. I tried not to cry.

Later Nigel took us to a traditional Leeds Curry House where we continued to be extremely offhand with each other and didn't even fight over the final bill. It was an enjoyable way to spend the Saturday evening although Eugene burned his face on a particularly hot chilli.

The 'Getting Laid at a Con' panel discussion was a bit cringe-making (but not enough to drive me back to drink). I sat in my new Che Guevara tee-shirt, sipping yet another Diet Coke and hoping someone would get their breasts out to liven the proceedings up. Happily, someone did.

Saturday night only became fun when Christina Lake's party began (despite her immediately spilling red wine over my new Che Guevara tee-shirt). Her punch was a killer combination of fruit juice and tequila made all the more dangerous by the addition of our Havana Club.

At most parties I've ever gone to there are usually two types of people: - those who stay in the main room and dance all night and those who slunk about in the kitchen or in hallways and have drunken conversations about relationships and stuff. It seems everybody in fandom falls into this second category - which is all right by me because I suppose I'm one of those people too (I've a thing about hotel corridors). The party was fun but I think I was maybe boorish to Linda Krawecka.

By about midnight the party moved downstairs to the bar where I can remember sneaking off to a corner to have tequila slammers with Christina.

Come about 4.00am and natural attrition had reduced the number of con-goers to almost single figures. All the Americans had gone to bed and the bar staff kept looking at their watches.

By 6.00am the numbers could be counted on one hand but there was a steely determination



among those remaining to claim the title of being the Last Person to Leave the Bar. I think it was at this point that Lilian Edwards and myself started a rousing rendition of 'Design for Life', although the only lyrics either of us could remember were "A design for life, A design for life, A design for life, A design for life..." Everyone else looked on in horror.

By 7.30am the cleaners had arrived and were hoovering the lobby. The sun was coming up and I found myself in the position of being the Last Person to Leave the Bar (even the barman had long since vanished). The weight of my achievement hit me - I had drunk the entire Corflu Convention under the table and could still see! I had fulfilled, to the letter, my duties as the stereotypical drunken Irishman abroad and what's more I didn't feel ill. In fact, I thought to myself, I'll just grab a few minutes sleep, have a shower and then have an early breakfast. These Brits and Americans just can't handle their drink. I felt wonderful! I felt great!

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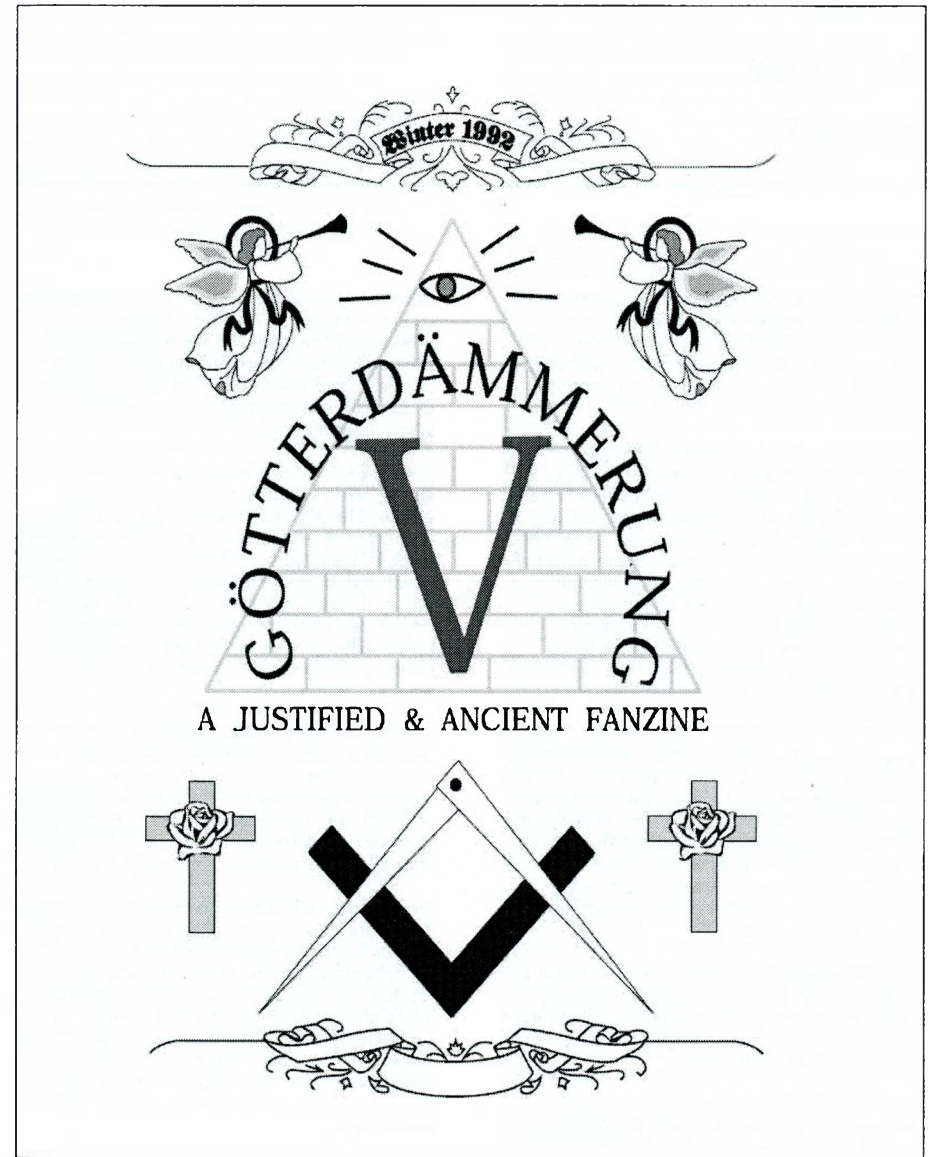
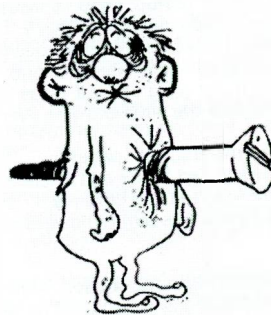
Needless to say, the next thing I remembered was waking a few minutes before the Corflu banquet was due to take place (1pm) and feeling less than great. In fact I felt terrible. The meal itself was an ordeal - the pate in particular was horrifying. To keep from falling over I held on to the table and tried to make some kind of conversation with Steve Green, Evelyn Murray and Greg Pickersgill. I failed miserably - I think I talked about bed-sheets. Even Tara Dowling-Hussey pouring a jug of water over me failed to bring me round. A phrase kept going through my head on some kind of endless loop: "No habla Español!" God only knows why...

After an hour and a half of terrible pain James took pity on me and guided us to the train station. I was too sick to say goodbye to anyone. On the way James discovered a second-hand oscilloscope shop with an oscilloscope in the window that he'd always wanted to own. Fortunately they weren't open on Sundays (which was a good thing because I didn't fancy carrying an oscilloscope through Customs on the way back to Belfast: "No, officer, it's not for the manufacture of electronic timers for bombs, honest.") Instead

we left Leeds empty-handed and went back to London. I vaguely remember meeting Alun Harries in the men's toilets at King's Cross but I could have been hallucinating.

So, I missed John D. Rickett's banquet speech, I missed the Awards ceremony, I missed the Sunday night wind-down session. In fact, come to think of it, I missed almost all of the Corflu programming. I didn't meet that many people - certainly not many Americans; didn't receive very many fanzines; never saw a copy of the Plokta Crew's daily newsletter; never met Ulrika. It was just a mind-destroying round of drinking and alternatively feeling great or feeling terrible. It may make for a crap con report but, I have to admit, I really enjoyed myself.

(But on the whole I'd still rather be back in Havana.)



## Grinder

Joe McNally

(Götter 5)

Yesterday, I did something that scared me. Yesterday, I found myself chasing three twelve-year-old girls with a wheel brace, with the possibility of extreme brutality well to the front of my mind. This was not something I enjoyed.

Some background. While at University I became good friends with a guy who lives down the road from me. Let's call him Sean. He went to the same school as me, although he was about three years younger. However, thanks to a good deal of pissing about on my part while at uni, we ended up in second year together, and indeed went on to make a couple of videos together. We graduated together and have remained good friends since (perhaps unsurprisingly, since as I write it's only about five months since we graduated).

Sean lives at the other end of Somerton Road from me. The 'bad end'. Somerton Road is like a microcosm of Belfast. At one end - the end furthest from the city centre - it's nice, quiet, middle- to upper-middle class. At the other, it's hell. The other end, which is just under half a mile from my house borders on a smallish estate, which in turn borders on an area called Tiger's Bay.

Now, the way of things here, as you might be aware, is that just about everything except public transport, public toilets and shopping, is segregated. There are catholic newspapers and protestant newspapers.

There are catholic schools and protestant schools. And, of course, there are catholic estates and protestant estates. The one at the

other end of the Somerton Road is protestant, as is neighbouring Tiger's Bay. Solid protestant; the sort of place where the kerbs are painted red, white and blue throughout the year, and where the bunting for the 12th of July Orange marches goes up in May and stays up until it rots.

The family lives in the top flat of a three storey semi, with the other two flats lying empty. There's usually about five or six people in the flat at any given time - Sean, his mum, three of his sisters, and the occasional cousin - although until people start coming back from school or college, his mum is usually in there on her own. Sean himself hasn't been there for a while; he's been working as a lagger on a building site in Ennis, Co. Cork for a few weeks.

Sean's family are catholic, sort of. He's described them to me in the past as "the crappiest taigs in the world". His father, for instance, hasn't been in a church since 1974, when he was his brother's Best Man, and even then he was surprised to find that the mass wasn't in latin anymore. You get the picture.

Despite this, his sisters go to catholic schools. There are good and practical reasons for this. If your family had ceased practising catholicism in protest at the persecution of Galileo, and you went to a protestant school, you'd still probably be branded a taig. Likewise, if one of your dim and distant ancestors once said, "Bout ye, Martin" to Luther, and you were to try to get by at a catholic school, you'd be a snout, and that would be it.

Anyway, his sisters go to catholic schools. The youngest, who is about seven or eight, goes to a primary school about five minutes' walk away from the house. Unfortunately, the house is opposite one of the bus stops used by pupils at the nightmarishly 'hard', and utterly protestant, Castle High School, which is one of those secondary schools which tends to house the absolute dregs of society. Of course, it has its catholic equivalents, and I doubt if any protestant living near *them* would find life a picnic.

Of late, a group of a dozen or so girls, about twelve or thirteen years old, has begun to make life hell for Sean's family. They spotted his youngest sister walking past one day, and followed her, spitting and yelling. She did the only thing she could which was to run into the house, slam the door, and run upstairs bawling. The crowd stayed outside for a while, but they left when the 3.15 bus arrived.

There's been a few scary incidents since then. The night after all this happened, the windows in the downstairs flat were smashed. A few days later, graffiti appeared all over the outside walls of the house, on the road outside, and on some of the fences opposite: GRFC - Glasgow Rangers Football Club; CCA - Crusaders Casual Army, a local gang of protestant soccer thugs; UVF - Ulster Volunteer Force, a terrifyingly brutal protestant paramilitary organisation; and, most chillingly, "Irish Out".

Since then, the Castle Girls have been regular visitors to Sean's front yard, and I've made it my habit to call over at about three o'clock whenever I can. Once or twice, the crowd has been gathered around the front door when I drove into the yard, and dispersed quickly.

Yesterday, I was driving past the house on my way back from leaving a friend off for a job interview and noticed Sean's mum standing in the midst of a crowd of these girls, so I drove up the road a bit, turned round and headed back to see what was going on. Just as I pulled up, the girls were leaving, heading back to the bus stop.

I went into the house, and Sean's mum was going mental. A parcel had arrived for her from some mail order company, and she'd gone down to the door to collect it. The girls had immediately converged, and started shouting at her - "Here missus, your fuckin' windies are broke, and, "Are you a taig?" that sort of thing. The very spirit of wit and sophistication.

So, anyway, I decided to stay for a cuppa, or at least until the bus arrived at 3.15. Sure enough after a few minutes, they came back into the yard, and started walking towards the front door. Sean's mum asked me to go and see if I could get rid of them, so I wandered downstairs to see what they were at.

What they were at was simply hanging around the door. They didn't press the bell, or knock. Perhaps they were trying to pluck up courage to go in, I don't know. I'm fairly sure that the last thing they expected was to be confronted by me, putting on my best: "Fuck off right now or die" face, but actually pretty fucking nervous.

I asked then what they were doing; they said they wanted to speak to "the man". I pointed out a major flaw in this claim, to wit, that there weren't actually any men in the flat at the moment, apart from me, who they could now see. They then said that the wanted to see "the woman", so I told them to fuck off. Not particularly subtle, I know, but I was trying to intimidate them. They started getting stropky, so I told them in no uncertain terms that, despite what they obviously believed, they were leaving, that they were leaving *now* and they weren't coming back, ever.

One of them bolted for the gate, and the others didn't move. I went over to my car, opened the boot and got out the wheel brace. It's a terrifying object at the best of times; it's one of those telescopic ones that folds out to about thirty inches to save you putting your back out. So I took this out, flicked it out to arm's length, which opened it out, and swung around. She ran faster than I've ever seen anybody run. I walked out to the gate, and saw that they were running away, fast. Another group of girls at the bus stop - who



hadn't been involved up until now - immediately started screaming, "It wasn't us! It was them!" and pointing furiously at several fast-departing figures. I shouted after them to the effect that if I ever saw them outside Sean's house again there would be bits of them found all over the length and breadth of Somerton Road, brandished the wheel brace in a threatening manner, and went back inside.

I stayed in the front room with Sean's mum until they got the bus; they shouted a lot, but they didn't try to cross the road again. They got their bus, and that was that, for the day.

I don't know what's going to develop from this. It could escalate very violently, very quickly. After all, running away is enough to get windows broken, what do threats of horrific maiming get you?

What worries me most, though, is what might happen if one of them goes to the RUC about this. After all, I'm a big lad, and very intimidating looking, to those that don't know me. I'm beginning to wonder how well the authorities would look upon tales of giant maniacs chasing children - chasing *girls* - with what amounts to a six-pound steel club, screaming, quite literally, blue murder.

I'm not a violent person, you see, despite all the this talk of injury. I haven't hit another person in anger since about 1984, when I was in fifth form. The thought of violence actually makes me physically sick - after all the events described above, I had to go and sit down and do some breathing exercises for a while, just to stop myself puking.



## Tommy Who?

Mark McCann

(Götter 8)

"The he drinks are on me for the rest of the night lads...honestly."

I think it was these tumultuous words which finally convinced me that he really did mean it. Tommy was off to Toronto in a few days time and wouldn't be coming back - ever. As I quickly tried to calculate how many rounds I could order before closing time without seeming too greedy, the realisation began to sink in. We would never be seeing Tommy again. This was it. Whatever had to be said, had to be said now. Ten years of friendship had to be somehow encapsulated, dissected, cogitated, and celebrated in the next few hours because this really was the last time we would have the opportunity. And then, at that moment of painful epiphany, a drunken brunette in six inch stilettos vomited violently at our table. Whatever meaningful statement I was about to make to the group was lost as we picked bits of carrot off our jeans and moved our pints out of the steaming pool of sick. Instead, Eugene smoothly filled the awkward moment by ordering double Glenfiddichs for everyone. God only knows why, but we somehow thought it would be a good idea to have our final farewell pint in Laverys Gin Palace. There's a collective delusion in Belfast that Laverys is the best pub in the city. Personally speaking I find it comparable to drinking in a public toilet: an overwhelming smell of piss and vomit, with lots of strange people milling about who look like they're about to commit acts of gross indecency. (What more do you want from your local? I hear some of you ask.) There had already been the official farewell party for Tommy a few nights before at Eugene's house. A time for friends to turn up to eat

scotch eggs, drink cans of Millerand listen to Eugene's Cuthulu rock albums. Tommy, staying strictly to form, arrived both late and drunk, with Alison Freebairn in tow. No one actually noticed his late arrival as Eugene's wife Katherine and her sister Nicola had helpfully constructed an ersatz Tommy using a balloon, some clothes and old copies of the Sunday Times.

The real (at least we assumed it was) Tommy had arrived in time to blow out the candles of his farewell cake - an act performed to the strains of the Canadian national anthem played by the massed stylophones of the Canadian Royal Mounted Police (or maybe it was Eugene's PC - I'm not sure). I hadn't been feeling particularly comfortable about the idea of the party before hand. James and I had decided earlier that day that the best course of action would be to arrive at the venue already drunk. But the plan backfired and instead of experiencing the comfortable numbness of the gently pissed I arrived at the party experiencing the in-your-face hyper-reality of the truly rat-arsed. By the look on James' face he was in similar dire straits - his eyes wandering about the room trying to find focus. To cope with the feeling I stayed safely in the corner pretending to look for a decent song in Eugene's record collection. The night ended for me with a homo-erotic arm wrestling session with Tommy and later a shambling walk home with Lysette. I was almost knocked down by a car while standing in the middle of the road trying to find the Belt of Orion. Once again a bad choice of recreation drugs.

I first met Tommy in 1986 at Queen's University where he had just started the SF Society. It turned out to be an enjoyable night's craic and I made a promise that I would be back every fortnight. The soon-to-be usual suspects were there: Eugene, Joe McNally, Nyree, James McKenna and James McKee among others. But it was Tommy who kept the thing together with his easy going affable nature. I could see myself striking up a good friendship with him and the others. However, for the time being, it was not to be. For whatever reason I never really connected much with the group while at university. They went on to organise various conventions and meetings but it was only fleetingly that I ever came into contact with them after that. The occasional glimpse of Eugene shuffling down the street with a load of books; Tommy walking along the Lisburn Road groaning under the load of a massive Indian take-away; Joe McNally filming someone falling out of a window...Then in 1991 I was sitting with James in his bed sit in Eblana Street and he was showing me a DTP program he had just got for his computer. We toyed with the idea of using it to put together a fanzine and, independently, the name 'Tommy Ferguson' came to our minds as someone who we could bring in on the venture. (We'd seen TASH and knew he needed help urgently.) So I found myself phoning this guy at the Inland Revenue who I hardly knew and telling him we were going to publish a fanzine called Gottterdammerung and would he be interested? Does the pope wear a dutch cap? This lead to a night at his house drinking vodka and creme de menthe cocktails; which in turn, and with a horrible inevitability, lead to Tommy being evicted from his flat and the first crappy issue of Gotter.

Strangely, for a Tuesday evening, Laverys was nearly empty when I arrived. I was the first of the group there and sat myself up at the bar to watch Celtic being mauled four, nil by Hamburg in the UEFA cup. Customers in the bar received this pitiful performance with either looks of smug satisfaction or bitter weeping.

"Fucking hun", someone moaned.

Despite this and despite some elderly man taking his penis out in the corner, I was in a relaxed mood. James and Eugene arrived and we kept saying to each other: "You know something? I have a suspicion Tommy really is going this time!" But even though we said it we didn't really believe it. Not really. You see, Tommy's grand Canadian plan had had a long gestation period. He had been talking about it for almost a year but in a sort of offhand way that was half in jest. It had become a bit of a running joke. Then one day he said he was definitely going in November. He put his house on the market, left his job and started eating maple syrup. The clues were all there if only we'd paid more attention. One evening he called around at my house and said, "Mark I've changed my mind. I gave a relieved laugh. As I had fully expected, he was chickening out. But before I could say something smart-arsed he said, "I'm not going in November, I'm going next Friday."

Sticking strictly to a tradition already mentioned in this article, Tommy arrived at Laverys both late and drunk. He had been having a final meal with his American ex-girlfriend Margaret and was in lavish mood. He waved his just purchased flight ticket about before going off to the toilet.

"Shit", said Eugene. "Let's face it. He really is going this time." "Bollocks", said James. "He's just going to the toilet. Look, he left his coat behind. As the night wore on I thought to myself that the songs I was hearing in the pub at that moment would probably bring back memories of this evening in years to come. 'The night Tommy Ferguson left Ireland'. I decided that I'd make a point of making damned sure that it was a bloody good song that I would associate with the evening. Then just at that moment they played the Lemonheads' If I Could I'd Tell You and I thought to myself: OK, this would probably be quite appropriate. I'm sure that'll be the one. When I hear that line 'You were my most imaginary friend' in years to come I'll think of this last evening in Laverys. But to be honest, I suppose you can't really choose these things- they are just imposed on you by one's devious subconscious.

Many whiskies, Millers and Guinneses later; long after Eugene had tried to set fire to James' eyebrows by flicking matches at him and long after someone had come around to throw sawdust on the putrid pile of vomit next to our table, which had been making our eyes sting all night, we decided to go back to Eugene's for that final, final farewell drink.

I developed a theory about Tommy that night which I tried unsuccessfully to articulate. He is, you see, the Palmer Eldritch of Belfast fandom (which is appropriate as he's a Philip K Dick fan). I'll explain what I mean by that. Over the course of the past ten years Tommy has single-handedly created Belfast's 90sfandom from the dark recesses of his own imagination. Okay, so there were always a few people meeting at Whites Tavern over the years but there hadn't been much real capital-F-for-Fandom activity since the days of Hyphen. Now for someone like me this would have been a depressing situation. I would have said: "Bollocks to this" and gone off and took up something less boring instead.

But not Tommy. Tommy refused to believe what reality was telling him. To him there was always a 1950's fandom going on in the city - it was just a matter of looking for it. You can think of it as a sort of Platonic fan world; a painfully bright reality against which this miserable world we live in is but a damp flickering shadow - a kind of Friends as written by Walt Willis. (Although I'm not sure who gets to play Courtney Cox.) Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary Tommy was always prepared to believe that there were lots of fan boys and girls out there in the city bent over a dodgy duplicator getting a fanzine ready for their next convention or hurriedly typing up witty letters of comment to be dashed off to Attitude or whoever.

Now, as far as I or anyone else could see, this was patently untrue. The fact was no one gave a toss and all the city could 'boast' of were a few Trekkies. But then something strange happened. A few months ago while sitting in the Monico we suddenly realised that Tommy's pocket universe had finally achieved some kind of sickly reality. The Monico meeting were

being attended by lots of new people. There were three or four fanzines being written. There was a regular weekly Monico newsletter. People were at last going to conventions in England and Scotland and talking about fandom. Someone once had a heated discussion about Orson Scott Card! Tommy even made a witty reference to Ian Sorenson and people laughed knowingly! Sipping his pint Tommy gave a satisfied sigh and said, "My work here is done. It will be interesting to see if TommyWorld continues to exist after his departure. I have a funny feeling that now he's gone the little fan universe, with all its idiosyncrasies and anti-anecdotes which Tommy had so carefully cultivated, will disappear with him. Ah, well... Belfast's loss will be Toronto's gain.

And then it came time to go home. We'd got fed up watching QVC and the only beer left were a few tins of Steiger. We'd tried phoning people but it was three in the morning and most people who'd answered were a mite upset at us getting them out of bed. It was time to go.

At the door Tommy said. "So this it..." "We all shuffled uneasily not looking each other in the eye. "It's been an interesting ten years or so..." "Listen, I'll tell you what", Eugene said. "Why don't we all meet tomorrow afternoon before you go to catch your plane for a real final, final farewell pint? It seems silly to end it here." Relieved, we all agreed. We'd successfully put the painful farewell off for another few hours. Tomorrow it would be. We rolled home drunk and I said goodbye to Tommy before going inside to be very sick in the toilet. The next morning James gave him a call but there was no answer. By lunchtime we'd found out he had packed and was already gone. We didn't have that farewell pint after all.

A few days ago I was sitting on a Citybus travelling home from work. I was listening to the radio on my personal stereo and Shed Seven's Going for Gold came on. I slowly, regretfully, realised that here was the song that my mind had decided to unconsciously link with our last evening at Laverys. Shed bloody Seven!

Are you going for good or are you going for gold? "I mean, what the hell is the significance of that!?"





## Designated Drinker

Tommy Ferguson

(Götter 9)

"Well it has currently reached today's high of minus 18 and the temperature is expected to drop to minus 24 tonight. Wind chill today is around minus 45. Wrap up warm folks..." -----

Canada, eh? Scary. Really scary. I lie awake at night and wonder just what the hell I am doing here? The wind chill is minus 30 outside, there is nowhere for me to go and the television is just like Billy Joel says it is. I have no real job worth speaking off; my friends are not the sort I can really talk to and no-one goes to the bar to meet people. Yeah, I'm scared. But what the hell, I'm here...

It really is like a different country. They talk funny here - I was told that Canadians spoke English, but was that ever misleading, eh? Not only do people have real problems understanding what I say, when they do they have no idea what I'm talking about. ("Nothing so unusual there," I hear you say, "We've never been able to understand you anyway...") I have to speak slowly and not use too many of those big words I'm fond of - and it makes it really difficult to talk to people in social situations. That is one of the reasons I feel somewhat alone here.

Another is the attitude of the people. It would appear that the whole of Toronto is about 20 years behind the rest of the world. There is a real aura of the Seventies about the town that the skyscrapers on Bay Street belie. There are an enormous number of bikes on the streets (one bike shop on Bloor is open to 2am) with the inevitable memories of Cuba. Hemp and marijuana are to be found everywhere and the popular music FM station plays old Pink Floyd,

Yes and early Genesis. Personally I'm not too worried about this, I like a lot of that stuff, but even I know that you need a break every once in a while from the Hippy and progressive music. The Seventies are a nice place to visit but I don't want to live there.

These are the sort of cultural clashes that I expected when I got here. There was no way to prepare for them. You could read up on the culture; I did. You could read upon the politics; I did, and you could talk to people who lived there. But until you trek half a mile through 20cm of snow to the gym only to find yourself too tired to even change into your lycra you never really know what is in store for you. The weather I was told about. I thought the British people talked about the weather - but they're mere amateurs. Here, we have real weather. Weather that matters - if it means taking an umbrella with you in Britain, here it means talking a cellular phone. A warm coat back home is a sleeping bag and self heating camping meals out here. It really is a question of survival. Obvious really, when you compare the sizes of the countries but the intellectual awareness pales when you come face to face with normal weather conditions that can kill or seriously injure you.

Having to deal with things like that rubs off on people. For example, it is a law here that you have to shovel the snow off the path in front of your house. This is all so obviously common sense that I didn't see any problem with it until I tried to cross the street. Where exactly do you shovel a four foot layer of snow too? I have been reliably informed it is supposed to go on your lawn - but that would mean instant death for the grass and flowers given the crap

that the snow picks up lying on your front path. So the simple solution is to shovel it onto the road. Then you sit back and watch the fun and games as cars try to negotiate the small mountains of snow and icy conditions; and pedestrians try and cross the street. I've helped two older women try and cross the street already who could have done some serious harm to themselves.

I seem to remember winter starting in late October back home - it was always freezing cold on Halloween - and lasting through to those 'light April Showers'. Here however they have real seasons (not just hot rain and freezing cold rain that we had in UK) and there is the 'Fall' in between the summer and winter. Here winter starts on the vernal equinox. As the man on the radio said: "The good news is the days are getting longer; the bad news is that winter has started." Even with real bad news like that these foreigners still put an upbeat message onto it.

I used to wonder what it was like in Canadian winters. You know, you see the snowmobiles, skiing and all that other real winter stuff going on and wonder just how those people survived. I mean if the temperature is minus 18 and there is a wind chill of nearly minus 40 how do you cope? Can anyone survive that and have a life? Yes, apparently. Walking to the pub the other night I saw a woman out walking her dog on the main street. She was skiing, for god sake, with the dog on a rope behind her. It's like going down any major high street in a British town and finding someone rollerblading in the middle of January. In shorts.

But it is not just the large and obvious things like temperatures that belong in physics labs. As Quentin Tarantino noted in Pulp Fiction: it's the little things. Details, ways of saying and doing things. The attitude to alcohol here epitomizes this: people treat it with respect and don't give it the full abuse it truly deserves. There is no tradition of buying a round of drinks, and there is an awful lot of coffee and tea drunk in bars. It is like a town full of that sensible guy in the office who has one drink and then switches to orange juice for rest of the evening. And he isn't even a

designated driver(Urrghh - horrible concept!). And the pubs. Boy is there ever a hike to find a decent example of the genre. The local Irish pub is a bit of a dive, and there are a few decent watering holes along the strip where I live but no real pubs.

Allens on the Danforth is the best pub in town, so far. It is a classic Irish pub, but without the theme - if you know what I mean. John Maxwell, the man who opened and owns the bar, told me that he wanted the bar to be: "A loving testament to the place my dad introduced me to in New York: the Irish bars and American saloons."

Although I've never been to New York, by entering the place I think I know what he means: a long bar facing half a dozen snugs, panelled in dark wood, opening out into a restaurant floor divided down the middle again with panelled wood. It has a classy feel to it and yet retains the smoky atmosphere, with hunched figures of determined drinkers at the bar. It really is a sort of up-market Irish bar.

Compare this to McVeigh's on Queen and Church, a real Irish bar, much in the vein of Lavery's (See Mark's editorial in Götter 8): bad pop music in background, and in Canada they really know how to produce bad pap music, horse racing on TV, foul beer at extortionate prices and deeply annoying customers. Back home all this would be taken in stride as par for the course, if you wanted anything else you had to go to a restaurant and that was a woosy thing to do anyway. 'What's wrong with abusive staff members, horse racing and a shit atmosphere? You queer or summat?'

In Canada you're considered weird and strange if you would put up with such conditions, something that John Maxwell has noted well - he retains the atmosphere of being in an Irish pub but gives you all the service, politeness and efficient service you could want.

The small things make it different. There is a highly regulated off-sales policy: all the places selling beer to the public are run by the government, no beer or wine in the

supermarkets. There is no turf accountants or bookies - all gambling is based on the tote system so it is nearly impossible to judge form. Pool and snooker halls are social places, where you bring a date, or the family for lunch; hanging out here is seen as responsible and won't lead you to becoming Jimmy White or Alex Higgins. These are things that you can't prepare for, no matter how good your preparations are.

Now that I'm here though, I'm staring to acclimatize. One of things I've done is get fit again. Most people here do some form of activity, whether it be sports or just messing about in the gym. So I made a New Year's resolution. I've joined a local Community Centre which has a quaintly old fashioned exercise room, gym hall and, best of all, a 50 metre indoor running track. Joy. It also has squash courts (not much use for them after my ligament disaster) and apparently there is a pool as well in there somewhere. It gets me out of the house, makes me get up and do something in the winter (with the computer I could stay in - get beer and pizza delivered via the net - all winter).

I'm beginning to pick up on the politics as well. It is a really fucked up system. Local government is the town hall, or city hall as it is here, running 'metro' Toronto (akin to the old Greater London Council). Then there is the Provincial government, which is based

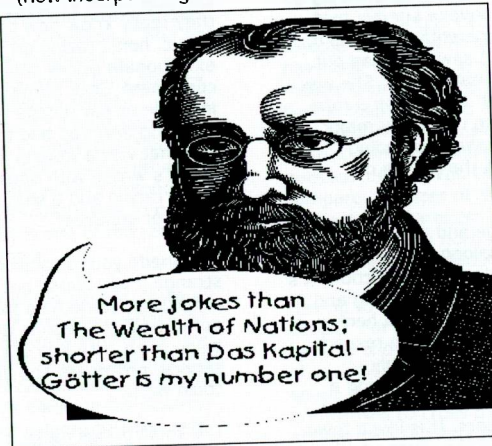
in Toronto and is responsible for running Ontario, roughly equivalent to the Scottish Office, or the Northern Ireland Office, but with the powers of the London parliament. Finally there is the Federal Government - the government of Canada with defence, Foreign Affairs and all that malarky. Each three levels has their own "cabinet" and "opposition" and well, to be honest, its all a bit messy. I mean local democracy is all well and good, and there are a couple of Toronto fans well into it, but really who gives a toss?

Local government is there to give power hungry local big wigs somewhere to go and stay the hell away from real people in the pubs. So the Provincial government is going to abolish Metro and amalgamate the surrounding neighbourhoods into a megaopolis of Toronto. Yeah, go ahead. I mean really there is more to life than worrying about bill 103. Have a drink, check out a movie, read a book - get with the program, enjoy yourself, and if you can do that whilst earning an income be thankful.

It is like that sign allegedly on the back of Los Angeles Airport taxis: "Welcome to LA. Please adjust your attitude." Canada is significantly different to be challenging to my life's conceptions, but similar enough so that the challenge doesn't completely overwhelm me. At least I feel able to deal with the paradigm shift that has become my life, although I'm not too sure I can survive much longer without my Bourbon Creams.

## Götterdämmerung Nine

(now incorporating *Neocatechumenate Monthly*)



Special 'Attitude' issue

## Tooralooraloo, Tooraloorapaddy

Brendan Landers

(Götter 9)

It's pushing six o'clock on a weary Friday evening and another week's work is done. It's time for a cold one. Gritty and grimy and crusted with dust I'm shower fodder, me, and I'm going out tonight, but shag all that for now. It's after work on a Friday and a mug of beer is the only thing. It's a sacred ritual, the Friday beer, since the dawn of the working class.

And I'm not one to break with tradition.

I find a pub. Not too flash. A little grimy like myself. A blue collar place with room in it where a guy can drink alone and unwind in peace. The boozier's dark and cool and quiet. I sidle up to the bar and take a pew. A peaceful, ruminative, private beer I'm in the humour for, to gather my thoughts and plan for the weekend.

The barman eyes me and I call for a blue.

I keep my head down and voice low. An Irish accent is like a clarion call to all and sundry to come and shoot the breeze. There's a perception prevalent abroad of the Irish as affable confessors. Hollywood's to blame for it, I reckon. Bing Crosby in *Going My Way*. Spencer Tracey. Pat O'Brien. Their roman collars fit them like tracheal condoms. Manly priests with hearts of gold and ever-ready ears. Tinseltown has a lot to answer for.

The barman pops a Blue and plonks it down in front of me. Walks away.

He knows the score. Knows when a weary man wants a quiet space for himself and his beer. Such appreciation of space is priceless.

I've seen the beach lined with cars and men in them reading their papers on a Sunday morning having escaped from their own homes because their wives of twenty years haven't gained this knowledge.

I sit up on a stool and knock back a slug. This is the crucial moment. I've spoken once, don't have to talk again till I'm on my way, just tap my glass now and then for a refill. But two stools down a punter's eyeballing me from under his hard hat. A boozy sweat is crawling down his face and his eyes are glinting with the light that gives drink its demonic reputation. He swallows half a boilermaker.

"Irish?" he says.

So much for my quiet beer. "You guys like your booze, I hear," he says.

The Irish as drinkers. Barry Fitzgerald perpetually pickled in *The Quiet Man*. Victor McLaglen crying into his beer in the same film. McLaglen crying into his beer in *Fort Apache*. In *She Wore A Yellow Ribbon*. In almost every movie John Ford ever made.

I shrug. I know better than to argue. All you achieve is grief and frustration. I've tried telling them that the caricature of the hard-drinking Irishman is largely a myth. That a Toronto Star survey a couple of years back showed that the Irish ranked pretty low on the totem pole of drinking nations. That, per capita, Canadians drink more than the Irish.

"I like a man who can hold his beer," says boilermaker's buddy, a roly-poly man with a Blue Jays baseball cap and a gut hanging out



of him that could comfortably contain Milwaukee. He lifts his glass for a toast.

"Here's to the little people - to the leprechauns," he says. Leprechauns. Spare me.

I have a theory about the origin of the leprechaun phenomenon. I reckon an American dreamed it up, a Hollywood scriptwriter maybe, halfway through reading Lord of the Rings on a hiking holiday through the Wicklow Mountains. Stopped to make a lunchtime sandwich of the local mushrooms, the magic ones. Spent the afternoon spaced out while little green men with funny accents pranced across his befuddled periphery.

Baseball Cap orders a rye and ginger. And a fresh Boilermaker for his buddy. Who turns a beatific grin on me.

"You Irish like to mix it up, show those Brits a thing or two, huh?" He throws a sly look at my tote bag. "Maybe you have some semtex stashed away in there, eh?" he says.

Nyuk, nyuk, nyuk.

Hollywood. John Ford again. The Informer. Mickey Rourke. A Prayer for the Dying. Harrison Ford. Patriot Games.

I have my stock answer for this one. "I'm a pacifist," I say.

He breaks his heart laughing. That's a good one, he reckons. Someone else joins in the chuckling from further down the bar. A woman in a denim skirt and tie-dyed T-shirt. Getting brave on her third or fourth gin and tonic.

"An Irish pacifist - that's an oxymoron if I ever heard one," she says.

Oxymoron. This one's gotta be an academic. Only an academic would use a word like oxymoron in a working class bar on a Friday evening after work. Academics can be the worst. They've read all the books and think they know it all. And they're duty bound, they reckon, to share their pearls of wisdom with the rest of us.

This one's on a roll.

"My son," she says, "lives with two Irish boys who have just arrived from the old country. He says that they complain incessantly about the Canadian food. It's too foreign for them. All they ever want to eat is meat and potatoes he says."

"Really?" I say. It's supposed to sound sardonic, but I may as well be farting at a thunderstorm. "Really," she says.

Boilermakers feeling no pain. He's ready to party. "Sing us a song, Paddy."

Paddy! Men have died for less. Boilermaker launches into a chorus of Danny Boy. He has a voice that constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.

The Irish as singers. Hollywood again. John Ford again. Bing Crosby again. Tooralooalooing all over the silver screen. I've had enough. I knock back my beer, toss a few bills on the bar, leave them to it. I've got better things to be doing. Bigger fish to fry.

I'll go home and freshen up. There's a fundraiser tonight and I'm singing a few songs. I'll mill some bacon and cabbage. They'll be plenty to drink - I'll murder a gansey - load of pints. And maybe they'll be a bit of scrap. I haven't had a good scrap in months.



### Thanks.

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