



The Twenty fifth issue of a sortof letter substitute, kinda thing, maybe weekly, maybe not, from:

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Available only via the net at the moment. I'm still looking for email addresses for Graeme Cameron, who lives in Vancouver, BC, Cath Jackel, who lives in Edmonton, AB and Ms Gommoll. Welcome to the new readers and see the colophon for the usual disclaimer. Thanks to Mark McCann for computer usage and computer advice. This issue dated, already, 22/12/97

Harris: The Beginning.

So there I was having another blood draw, my tenth that day and the nurse was messing about in my veins looking for the mother lode. Not that she had to, every other one of my 42 blood draws over the past three days had been a piece of piss they actually had to give me a couple of cotton wool buds to stop the flow. But not this one. Then the trainee nurse comes up to her and starts to complain about how the computer wouldn't let her register this form, and that the senior nurse was being a complete bitch and more office shit.

My nurse, still panning for red platelets amongst my increasing shy vein, was providing a running commentary about the whole operation to this person, face to face. So after a few moments I turned to the trainee nurse:

"Excuse, this woman has a needle in my vein, would you mind fucking off for a moment and letting her do her job?"

"Well, excuse me! It's not as if"

"Just go away. Now."

The bruising on my arm started then. 42 other blood draws, and only a small scab and minimal pain as the needle entered the hole. No scarring, no damage to the surrounding skin and no bruising. One blood draw plus one stupid idiot of a nurse equals a 5 cm yellow and ochre bruise. Jesus.

I'm back in Harris for me second period of four days and still have to go through a rigorous blood draw schedule. A typical example of one day: It is eight am and for the first two hours there is a blood draw every twenty minutes. Six times the needle went into my arm and 5 ml of blood was drawn. For the next three hours it was every 30 minutes, another six and then every hour until 8pm when it was every two hours until

midnight. No don't bother doing the math: that is a total of 21 needles stuck into my arm in a 14-hour period.

What, you thought they gave you all that money for nothing?

After the first three, though there is really nothing to it. The hole has been punctured in your skin and they keep inserting the fresh needle into that hole and the pain is minimal. Unless of course the training nurse isn't quite up to the job yet and fails to remove the sample from the needle casing...As she removes the needle, a lovely horror B movie jet of blood comes out of my arm. It was actually quite funny, until it threatened to get on my favourite tee shirt. She quickly mopped things up and notched up my one bit of excitement for the day.

When you are in Harris you take your excitement where you can get it. Everything is laid down for you. You eat when and what they tell you, to within a 30 second time frame. You eat it all, everything, regardless (hence no vegetarians on any trial.) You have to be on the spot for your medication, for your vitals, for your blood draws and be available, again, to within 30 seconds, whenever they wanted you. As terrible as this may sound, compared to my last study it was a joy in that case the time frame was 5 seconds.

From there to the dosing with the drug concerned. 250ml of this disgusting, chalky like substance, in a solution of 450ml of water which was then rinsed with another 450ml of water which I had to swallow as well. All of this within a time frame of two minutes. That is nearly a litre of water, tasting like it was straight from the Lagan River. Beer, maybe, at a stretch, but this foul connotation from some laboratory? I remember Mark's advice from previous articles: think of the money. I did rather well with the image of Seattle and managed to finish the lot off. And keep it down.

The water and peeing restrictions started at 12 midnight and ended, after dosing and blood draws, at 10.30 am. That isn't so bad if you can stand not going to the loo as soon as you got up (the trick being to spend 11.30pm to 12 midnight in the bog literally wringing the urine out of your penis.) When you consider, however, that in order to test the effectiveness of the drug we had to drink a minimum of 2 litres of water (plus milk, orange and 7 Up with meals) in every twenty four-hour period, this was going to be a problem.

So much so that when they took the urine sample at 10.35am one guy had to go back into the bog with his sample jar for a second time. Surprising when you consider the sample jugs contain one and half-pints of fluid.

The weird, but obvious, thing about it all was that as the day progressed and the urine samples were being taken the fluid got increasingly pale in colour and the odour almost disappeared, but the temperature rose. It was almost as if the 7UP we were constantly

being fed was just running straight through us. My liver is probably still celebrating the complete flushing out it received.

Never has the phrase taking the piss being so literally interpreted. At 8.55 on the last day I had to give my last sample they had taken the piss so much that I could just about fill the 25ml sample container and the 1.5 pint jug remained stubbornly empty and this with the taps flowing and the flush system of the urinal wasting water like a UN peace keeping force in Ethiopia.

The food as well as the fluid was totally controlled. The last time I had been in Harris I'd had fairly rotten food as the drug was supposed to react against full stomachs and we got soup and high protein shakes. This time the food was quite substantial, although there was no breakfast and everything was microwaved. Yeah, household tool of the 90s and the future of cooking, I know. I still don't like the buggers: what is wrong with steaming food, grilling meat and al Dante vegetables? I ask you, microwaves have killed the art of good cooking. But, there was plenty of good stuff nonetheless: chicken, beef and pork with lots of spuds and interesting deserts.

Except for one meal. This was to be a light lunch on the first day of dosing: some boiled chicken, oatmeal bread, orange cordial and a salad. With beets.

Pickled beetroot and I have an interesting history, much akin to my views on liver. When I was five or so I was taken shopping for the first time (that I can remember) with my mother this was a big adventure. When we got to the meat counter (no pre-packaged cuts of meat in them days) I caught sight of the raw liver and puked all over the counter. I just didn't get it, and still don't. The liver is a filter. In the case of cows, who eat all that MRM, sheep brains and shit they put into their feed, the liver works extremely well. Even that the non-discriminating cow's liver filters out complete crap, refusing to digest the really bad and then we eat it. Are you fucking serious? Cruetefeld Jacob Disease, anyone? This perspective came later, at five years old it was instinct.

Beetroot on the other hand I was okay with. We rarely had it my house when I was a youngster way too healthy and good for you, apparently. So another public display of personal food fetishism happened at school where, for a short time when my dad was on strike, I got free meals. I can still remember the plate, the way the food was laid out, the wonderful apple crumble and custard we had for desert (and which we all ate first) and the sliced beetroot.

The lettuce and cucumber had turned red as the juice seeped throughout the food on the plate. The beets were interesting in form and texture and, pardon the pun, it was with relish that I sliced, diced and ate them. I still play with my food that way, it is just a little vicious streak I have. Gobbling the beets down, as all kids do in School canteens ("quick, quick, out to the playground and kick some poor kid's head in") it took a moment or two for my taste buds and stomach to recognise what was happening.

We used to sit at tables of ten, four on each side and one at each end. I sat at the end of one long side and my vomit reached the person sitting at the head of the table at the other side. I've drunk bad German wine mixed with Thunderbird fortified wine at Bill Boyle's house once and didn't come close to matching the Volume and velocity of that puking experience. I've seen grown men, in bars in Toronto, have projectile vomiting contests that paled with stomach clenching that went on that day.

It was not a childhood prejudice against beets, not like the normal prejudice against anything green on your plate. It wasn't that beets were cheap and yet still good for you and I was being a streetwise, city smart kid who didn't eat that redneck food. It was simply a physical rejection of beets on a huge scale. The quickness of the response meant that this stuff was not going to be inside me and was leaving, the same way it entered, right this second. The bouncers in my stomach just said:

"Oi, you, we don't like you're sort here. Take you food colouring and preservatives and nasty beet-taste the fuck out of here. Now, mate. Get out 'ta fuck."

And kicked beet ass right up my asphogagus, throat and mouth and all over Jimmy 'The Rat' McLoughlin. The weird thing was he was a good friend of mine, there was plenty of other people at the table I would have chosen to address my body's dislike of beets to, but my body gave me no option. Strangely enough Jimmy didn't like beets either (whether this was pre- or post-beet splattering I never did find out.)

So I found myself in Harris looking down at the beets on the paper plate. Normally I could have fobbed these off on some one else, but the quality control bastards were all over the kitchen. Two huge fuck-off slices of beet, about an inch thick. I couldn't get a whole slice into my mouth, I had to cut them up into four bits. Four times I would have to eat these fucking things.

I ate them. I turned very pale, and was physically gagging as I quickly chewed them and swallowed them. I had a swollen throat, they just wouldn't slide down. I massaged my throat to get them down. Swallowed copious amounts of 7UP. Steadied my hands between bits, and forced them shaking like I had the DTs, into forking the pieces from my plate to my mouth. But I ate them.

The only way I could do this was Mark's remedy: thinking of what I would use the money for. My trip to Seattle, to see the West Coast, Seattle fandom and Lesley Reece again. True love, or what? And the irony there always is in tales like these Lesley Reece absolutely adores beets. I mean she doesn't like much else in the way of food, but she could eat beets for sport, could go to the Olympics and eat beets for the USA and then turn professional and make a serious living eating beets. In Harris I kept the Apple Crumble and custard for last and, unlike the school canteen, didn't savour it at all I swallowed it in seconds.

Part two next week folks. And now, you.

Rhodri James rhodri@wildebst.demon.co.uk "Thanks for the slice of your obsession that is TommyWorld 24. I reckon we're all obsessive about something in some form or other, but I'm not sure exactly what the something is in my case. Or yours, for that matter. Victor and Nick Hornby's "teacher" are just extreme examples, that's all."

Alison Scott plokta@fuggles.demon.co.uk "I've seen a lot of commentary in the mainstream press about 'borderline autistic' behaviour recently, which echoes the fannish refrain on the subject. It's clear to me that there's a continuous range of socially dysfunctional behaviour, with SF fans, Arsenal supporters and trainspotters at one end of the scale, and the rare untreatable autistic at the other. I'm reminded of the almost insufferable Damon Wise, who suffers from Asperger's syndrome (for those who don't know, a set of dysfunctional behaviour somewhere in the middle of those mentioned above). He goes round telling people about how he's the 'most normal person with Asperger's syndrome'. I can't help thinking that trying to be the 'least normal ordinary human being' would be a much better life goal, really. But you may know Mr Wise well, as he is an active (primarily 'Star Trek') fan in Ireland and e-space.

On the other hand, I don't think that the desire to produce a beautiful fanzine is in any way abnormal human behaviour. The best fanzines are craft objects, with fine writing and fine production complementing each other. I think, on the whole, that the 'Plokta' cabal as a group tend towards the 'make it perfect' school of fanzine production. As individuals, who knows? I certainly want the fanzines I produce to be well written and well produced, and I think that poor layout detracts from an otherwise good fanzine. On the other hand, good layout won't rescue a poor one, so faneds who spend more time on the layout than the text probably have the balance wrong."

Victor M.Gonzalez squib@galaxy-7.net "You have a remarkable talent for having arguments without letting the other person know. I won't deny the title obsessive, but I think my version of it is rather less extreme than some. And design is design; it doesn't matter how good your computer is. Multiple fonts were available long before Postscript (remember Letraset), and still most publications are done with a just a few fonts. I wonder why. And, for the record, Squib's design includes two main fonts, one for body text and one for headlines -- and both serve the other's purpose at some point. And then there's the third font used for the lettercol headline. So there. Hope you're having fun."

Lesley Reece reece@oz.net "Did you see the Pen Guy while you were here? I forget -- in any case he's the old dude with 407 pens in his shirt pocket, and he walks around Capitol Hill, sweeping the sidewalk with a decrepit broom. Nobody wants to think of

themselves as a present or future Pen Guy, but I think Mark's probably right about autism and fandom. I'm as deeply sad as the next person. My brain is totally crammed with useless information -- in my case it's mostly about music instead of Babylon 5, but the potential is there. How does it help me, in a Darwinian sense, that I can sing entire TV commercials from 1967? What difference does it make that I know all the words to "Lipstick on Your Collar" and a thousand or more other stupid songs nobody cares about?

There's no Gibsonian way I can access that information and do a major file dump, either -- too bad, too, because all that stuff is probably taking up valuable hard disk space. Often I wish I could replace the entire "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" advertising campaign with something more useful, say the names of all forty-one Presidents of the US and the dates of their terms. But even if I could optimize myself, I don't think I would. All the stuff that's in there got in there basically by accident -- I didn't *mean* to become a walking encyclopaedia of crap music; it just happened. I think that's the case with all the sadoes we know, including ourselves (ain't that right, "Bus-schedule Boy"?).

Vicki Rosenzweig rosenzweig@hq.acm.org "Art Widner uses a "simplified" spelling that tries to be phonetic, and works more or less well depending on how closely the reader's accent matches his. I find it readable, but not as quickly as normal text. I suspect there are no inherently boring topics: it's a matter of shared interest and how interesting someone can make something. Andy Hooper cares more about TAFF voting patterns than most people; I'd probably have been happy to have that conversation, at least this year, but that's a special case."

Cheryl Morgan cmorgan@ceres.wallis.com "Whilst I am basking in the luxury of an ISDN line at home I don't really care (About the size of the TW Word file). Sorry to say I agree with Mark. Most people in fandom do seem to be compulsives of some sort or other, and if they are Arsenal fans as well... Of course it could be worse, they could be Raiders fans I'll probably be back in the UK in Feb and am planning to come to Corflu (even if it is in the Far Frozen North). Now, on the subject of WorldCon bidding zones"

IAHF: John D Berry ("Yer a publishing wiz again, y'are,"); Dave Langford ("Have always enjoyed your stuff in the pastTa, and appropriate seasonal noises,"); Nigel Rowe ("I assume everything went OK with your re(/dis?) location? I look forward to deciphering TW at work next week,"); Randy Byers; Jim Mallory with loads of bad jokes; Diane Kolodziejski of course I remember you, just not your surname; Christina Lake; and Eugene Doherty.

This is being distributed to a whole bunch of friends on the net, if you received this and would NOT like to be on the mailing list please accept my apologies for this intrusion and let me know so that you will not be bothered by further ramblings. If you know someone who would like to be on the mailing drop me a line.