



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

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Available only via the net. See the colophon for the usual disclaimer. Supporting Toronto in '03 for the 2003 WorldCon, Seattle and then Belfast for the next Corflu, Andy Hooper for Duff and Paul Kincaid for GUFF. This issue dated, already, 10/3/99.

Corflu report

By Mark McCann

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.

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

On our way to the hotel bar I wondered to myself how the K&M would interact with the rum.

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 Krawecke (among others) for directions to the nearest Mexican restaurant.

"Ask Debbi 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 Krawecke.

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!

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.)