



The forty-second 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. See the colophon for the usual disclaimer. Supporting Toronto in '03 for the 2003 WorldCon, Andy Hooper for Duff and Holdover funds for Taff (go on, persuade me otherwise). This issue dated, already, 22/11/98.

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Scum.

"Those people are scum, Thomas."

Nyree has a certain way with words, something that I've always admired in her. We were bantering away about some mutual acquaintances from our University days who had been elected to the new Northern Ireland Assembly.

"Yes, they are," I replied, laughing despite myself. "But they are our scum."

A traditional response in Northern Ireland, a recognition of unspoken truths, to be greeted with a laugh, a wry shake of the head.

"No. They are your scum, Thomas."

This brought me up short, in a way that Belfast conversations haven't done in a long time. It has been even longer than that that Nyree Campbell has been able to stop me in my tracks and give me pause for thought. We've known each other since 1985 and I thought that we had shared all that was going to shock either of us long ago. Apparently not.

These scum then. They are not terrorists working to bring down the state or reactionaries battling against them. They are not, a common occurrence these days, just local scum; hooligans and thugs that you see fighting the bit out on Saturday nights in the local bars. They are none of these.

What they are, mostly, is regular Joe's. They had, mostly, jobs; some of them quite responsible and well paying. They are intelligent, have been through the education system with good results, graduating to University and beyond. They are not violent in any way and have way more social skills than the average SF fan I have met (but more of Novacon in the next issue.) They are involved in local politics, are active in their

communities and have taken part in the recent election process. They now sit in our local assembly.

Why are they scum? I personally know two of them, both members of the Assembly. Interestingly enough one is a rabid Unionist of the Union First side of the Official Unionist Party and the other is a rabid Republican on the Republican Sinn Fein side of Sinn Fein. Both of them studied politics with me at University, both of them are absolute wankers and complete scum. However they are now elected members of the Northern Ireland Assembly with a healthy salary, secretarial budgets and a public voice. What distinguishes them, and a large number of other members, is that they working class. And to Nyree nothing is more scummy than that.

Post cease-fire Belfast has turned in upon itself. After the Omagh bomb there are no real BoogieMen out there now. There is no one to curse, no one to blame and no one to whom you can measure yourself against and always come out smelling of pure, clean innocence. The realisation has come, to me as to many others, that Belfast and Northern Ireland is entering into a new period of society, one in which everyone is in it together. I'm elated that this change has come about, because people aren't shooting each other anymore (well not officially anyway) but I'm sacred it allows all these wacko scumbags into the public sphere with control over our future.

Nyree's comments make it very clear that the political aspirations of most people is till firmly rooted in the past and these ambitions are still paramount to peace and stability. No taxation without representation, as the saying goes. I agree, strangely enough. Once the societies elect their 'scum' then you can argue about where that tax money gets spent. There is no such thing as 'class politics,' 'sectarian politics' or even, 'religious politics,' without the 'politics'. We need to have political systems established which is fair and representative of the population as a whole. Only then can we elect our representatives on the basis of what is good for us as a class, as a people or, frankly, whatever basis you want, 'scummy' or not.

Then your average Joe can be happy in the knowledge that what he wants to do at the weekends, how he wants to behave in public and what kind of taxation that will be applied to his drink, his income and his lifestyle will be decided by people he has voted for. Politics can then be normalised into a class structure, or divided into lines of nationalism and unionism. Politics can even be the polite society versus the scum. However it will be a political society of our choosing, and not imposed by London, Dublin or anywhere else.

"Yes, but even elected scum are still scum, Thomas," Nyree replied.

"Yes, that is true," I countered, "but this time they WILL be our scum."

Finally, after way too much seriousness, I got her to laugh. Even more impressive I got her to buy me a beer. Now that is progress...

News and Views.

A year, eh?

Yes it has been a year since my return from Canada, almost to the day. Time to take stock, see what has changed and think about the future. I'm in my thirties now; the body is starting to object to my more stressful demands placed upon it. I have a job that could mature into a career. Family and friends are all about and, mostly, still alive. So it is probably as good as time as any to have a look at my life and the last year.

Time for another TommyWorld is what I'm saying here folks.

Coming home from Canada What was that all about? Well I didn't settle down as much as I would have liked to. I really enjoyed the place, and met some wonderful people, fans and non-fans. Toronto is a really cool place: it is safe, it is clean and it is extremely easy to get around. And there is a lot going on there. Yes, it can be boring if you let it. Yes, it is a bit conservative, overall, and especially in local politics and government. But, as in all major cities, there are ways and means around all of this.

Not being a legal resident bugged me. I couldn't apply for proper jobs, was always worried about my health and accidents, worked too hard to earn a respectable living (after thoroughly enjoying spending my savings) and fuck man, but those winters are cold.

I missed home. You don't know what you're missing until you leave. I missed Lavery's bar. Those of you who know of the establishment will know how sad a statement this is. But it isn't exactly Lavery's, but more the whole idea of going out in Ireland, drinking until you can't anymore and then being thrown out of the pub. Coming into work the following day with a raging hangover and people think it is a bit of a laugh and don't ask you to do any work. In Allen's bar in Toronto you may, just, be able to get away with that once but any more than that you get sent home and, crucially, don't earn any money. Protestants, eh?

So that is why I'm home. It isn't much, I know, but at the moment it is all I can articulate. Maybe later, when it has all filtered down.

What has the last year been like? Well, scary and interesting. The development of the peace process, the cease-fires and the imminent arrival of a lasting solution have been a constant source of delight, and worry that it will all fall apart again. The Good Friday Agreement at once means a hope for the future and a remembrance of a wonderful Easter. I was at a club, the Crescent Arts, the Saturday night of the signing and I

haven't had such a good time out in Belfast in ages. There was a palpable sense of joy in the air. It wasn't just the happy smiling faces. It was the lack of tension in meeting and hugging new people. It was the lack of anxious over the shoulder looks. The sharing of spliffs became something more than simple dope etiquette. It was wonderful.

It lasted for about two weeks and then came the petty minded politics, the infighting, bitching and arguing. It made realise two things. One: We have real politics now. Bitching, infighting slagging and dirty tricks are all part of a healthy democracy. You can see what your elected representatives are up to, they can be held to account and you realise that they are not these abstract figures but people you know. Two: I feel safe, happy and at home.

It is a new life and new beginnings.