



Rob Hansen's
THE MARTIN CHRONICLES

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This collection is the result of public demand (there =have= been requests) and my own feeling that I ought to have something to trade while I'm still deciding whether or not to put out a general circulation fanzine. (Any LoCs on this will appear there.) First published mainly in my FAPazine LICKS and in BORN IN THE UK, a zine I used to do for a now-defunct US apa called APA OF THE DAMNED, all but one of these pieces (the much later PRECURSOR INTERSECTION) cover an 18 month period from May 1991 to November 1992 and are, believe it or not, an essentially true account of the events they chronicle. They're published here in chronological order rather than in order of publication. Martin Smith was my unwitting muse and he plays a part in all of them, hence THE MARTIN CHRONICLES, but their style was inspired by the writing of Charles Burbee and Dave Barry. (NEWSHOUNDS OF THE YORKSHIRE GREY is my attempt at a Dave Barry article, and Martin really does use Al Ashley's catchphrase.) The final piece, CEASE AND DESIST, was written specifically to end this collection but ended up seeing prior print in ATTITUDE, where it was rightly denounced by the readers for its particularly low humour. Lastly, but not leastly, I'd like to doff my beanie to Martin himself, a true and valued buddy who took the affectionate ribbing he receives in these pages in good spirit. Whisky, I believe.

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1. | MEXICON 4 MARTIN SMITH 0

Something would have to be done about Martin Smith, I decided, but what? I was thinking about my fellow Fanhattonite while sitting at a table in the lounge of the Cairn Hotel with a convivial group of fans, supping a tasty pint of bitter and gazing through the windows at the surprisingly charming town of Harrogate. We were indulging in that casual character assassination of absent friends that we all deplore yet enjoy so much, when committee person Abi Frost came dashing over. There was nothing remarkable in her doing this. Indeed, Abi dashed everywhere all weekend, a twitching streak of nervous energy propelled by adrenalin and fueled by prodigious cigarette consumption. Just watching her made you tired. She could have dashed for England. After a breathless greeting she showered us with copies of a flyer in support of her TAFF candidacy before zooming off again, crisp packets and flyers bowling along in her wake.

MEXICON 4 started on Friday, as conventions usually do, and after the opening ceremony we were launched straight into the play, the latest production from Geoff Ryman and his troupe. Having enjoyed earlier Ryman stage adaptations of Philip K. Dick's **TRANSMIGRATION OF TIMOTHY ARCHER** and of D. West's **PERFORMANCE**, I had high expectations of **THE UNLIMITED SEX COMPANY**, a totally original piece rather than an adaptation of an existing prose work. Unfortunately, it was incoherent and incomprehensible and, like many others, I left before the end. I did, however, stay long enough to see the bit where one of the players, Simon Ings, pranced around the stage wearing nothing but a black leather jock strap. The interest of the women in the audience picked up noticeably at this point particularly since, if the size of the bulge in the jock strap was to be believed, Ings was improbably well-endowed. There was much speculation in the bar afterwards as to just how much of this was him and just what he used for padding. I suggested a cucumber, one of the more sensible theories on offer. I'd started handing out copies of **THEN #3**, containing my history of 1960s British fandom, as soon as I arrived at the hotel. One of those who features prominently in its pages, Pete Weston, was delighted when I gave him his copy.

"What a fine fellow you are, Rob", he said, putting his arm around my shoulders and hugging me chummily. "Let me buy you a drink. Let me buy you two drinks."

He would buy me drinks all weekend. Even before he'd read it Peter Weston was impressed with **THEN #3**. Eileen Weston was impressed with Martin Smith. What impressed her about him was how French he looked. Martin's alleged Gallic qualities remained invisible to everyone else (though I suppose he does bear some resemblance to a crumpled Gaulois packet), but this didn't stop Eileen from pushing his jacket sleeves up to his elbows and ruffling his hair to emphasise his Frenchness. Personally, I didn't think this could be achieved by anything less than a complete body transplant.

I too was working on Martin's image. Over the previous twelve months Martin had achieved a rate of sexual success with women from different parts of the world and from different parts of the sexual spectrum that was the envy of lesser mortals such as myself and I thought that more people should know about this. Most fans knew Martin only as an amiable dope and butt of my jokes, but I was determined that from now on he would be known for what he truly was - a superstud and butt of my jokes. That's what friends are for, after all.

One of the first people I told was John Harvey. We were at an item organised by Linda Krawecka (the former Linda Pickersgill) that involved us standing around listening to taped music and drinking lots of punch at the time, sitting on the edge of the stage and feeling mellow. Earlier, at that same item, Eileen Weston had introduced Martin to a couple of teenage girls as a visitor from France who spoke no English and he had danced with them both, all the while responding to their attempts at conversation with a shrug and a feigned air of Gallic incomprehension. They were a little miffed when they discovered he was about as French as a bag of French fries only less tasty, but he still succeeded in luring them into the stalls. We could see them from the stage, and John whooped with laughter when I pointed out this doomed attempt at seduction. Just then Rochelle Dorey happened by and we told her what we found so amusing.

"I've got an idea", I said. "Why don't you go over to Martin, thump him on the shoulder, and shout: 'You bastard! You said you were coming straight back to bed!'"

John almost fell off the stage at this suggestion, particularly when Rochelle marched up to Martin and actually did it. I think I've only ever seen one other person's jaw drop as far as Martin's did then. (That had been a few weeks earlier, the jaw in question had belonged to a work colleague, and it had dropped thanks to my response to his simple greeting of "How are you?".

"Well hung", I'd replied, with a straight face.) Martin, possibly clued in by the laughter from the stage (John was going into meltdown beside me), soon figured out what was going on and gave me the finger. At which point Robert Stubbs wandered along, narrowly avoiding being knocked over by Abi as she dashed by, and wanted to know what was going on. We told him, and he asked if we wanted him to pull the same stunt as Rochelle had. We did, boy did we, but in the end he chickened out.

This anecdote went down well whenever I told it, which I did throughout the rest of the convention on the slightest pretext and, frequently, on none at all. Why, the very next morning it was appreciatively received by the group we were both sitting with in the bar. It was definitely more fun telling the story when Martin was present. As his mentor and fanfather I felt it was my duty to harden him against such mockery. Later he would thank me. Now, not realising that I had only his best interests at heart, he protested that:

"If you're my fanfather then this is child abuse!"

"Why this fuss about child abuse?" I asked. "When I was a child we had to abuse ourselves."

It was a stolen line, but it had the desired effect. The beer that everyone at the table was drinking except me was a Mexican lager called Corona. Allen Baum, a visiting Californian, was suitably dismissive, announcing that Corona was as burro piss compared to Dos Equis. I agree, but a remarkable quantity of the stuff was downed during the weekend nonetheless, most of it after a slice of lime had been twisted into the neck of the bottle. Slouching in the comfortable armchairs that filled the lounge, the Corona drinkers all tended to hold the bottles in their laps which, as someone at the table pointed out, looked remarkably phallic. This led inevitably to a discussion of the manly images often used to sell beer.

"You've heard of that macho Israeli beer, of course?" I queried.

"Which one's that?"

"He-brew."

Taking their groans as my cue, I left the table and wandered over to the bar, still pondering over what to do about Martin Smith. As Abi Frost dashed by, Pete Weston strolled over.

"Let me buy you a drink, Rob", he said. Ever polite, I did.

We talked fanhistory, and Pete revealed that the company he owned had made the actual Hugo award trophies, though not the bases, for every Worldcon since 1984.

"I was over there in 1983, talking to Craig Miller, and he was complaining about how much it cost to get the Hugos made and how badly cast some of them were. Since L.A.CON II had a collection of old Hugos on loan as part of an exhibition they wanted to put on he was able to show me just how poor they were. I told him I could do a better job at half the price and when I got home I found I could, too."

Pete had made a mould from the 'spare' Hugo that had been left over after SEACON '79, a trophy that he said he had "wrestled Malcolm Edwards for". Images from Ken Russell films sprang to mind, but for once the mind was quicker than the mouth and I said nothing.

These days Vince Clarke spends much of his time tending the temperamental electrostenciller that produces most of the e-stencils used by British fandom. After many months of this he badly needed a break. So he came to MEXICON and instead spent most of his time tending the temperamental electrostenciller that produced most of the e-stencils used for the convention newsletter. It was the same machine, too. In between trips to the committee room he, like me, got to meet Derek Pickles, who was attending his first convention in 37 years, a record for British fandom and pretty damned impressive in anyone's book. So going cold turkey can break you of the fannish habit, eh? Don't you believe it. Once a fan always a fan. If only the same were true of dancing...

The convention disco is an old and venerable tradition at British conventions, one at which old and venerable fans risk coronaries as they throw themselves around the dance floor with the same abandon as fans half their age and a third their weight. On this occasion the committee had arranged for the DJ to play records from the top 100 singles in the book by MEXICON guest Paul Williams. In the event things didn't quite work out that way but there was enough overlap to make it, in terms of the music at least, the best convention disco in years.

Usually I pace myself at these things, but there was enough good stuff that I let caution be bludgeoned into submission by the irresistible beat of that ol' debbil music and ended up dancing to three fast numbers in a row. This was not a good idea. At the end of the third track I was completely knackered. My heart was hammering furiously at my rib cage, Niagara Falls was gushing from my brow, my breathing sounded like a defective vacuum cleaner, and I was sure the pizza I'd eaten a few hours

earlier was planning a comeback. I wanted to die. Pete Weston flopped down onto the chair next to mine, red-faced and drenched. He looked worse than I did.

"Rob", he gasped, "let me buy you a drink."

Pete is a good ten years older than me, so his condition was only to be expected, but I had let myself go. No longer a giant of the convention dance floor as in my glory days (sound of mournful violins), I was nonetheless confident that my place would be filled by the young lions of British fandom, those energetic fans coming through, hungry for recognition. True, Martin Smith shows little sign of being energetic, at last not while vertical, and all he ever seems hungry for is Kentucky Fried Chicken, but I remained confident. This confidence crumbled when L. Steve Hubbard, who is younger than Martin, collapsed onto the chair opposite Pete and me. I was shocked. L. Steve looked worse than either of us. The young lions are already grown mangy, it seems. Dismayed, I retired for the night, hopeful that things would look better on Sunday.

Perhaps being on a panel moderated by TAFF candidate Abi Frost while wearing a badge proclaiming my support for TAFF candidate Pam Wells wasn't the most tactful thing I've ever done. Then again, Pam's campaign manager, Martin Tudor was also on the panel. Was Abi just being a good sport, I wondered, or was the panel going to be an experience she wouldn't wish on any of her own supporters? I'd soon find out. Not that I'd ever intended appearing on any of the programme items at MEXICON 4 in the first place. No, Abi had come looking for a sucker to take the place of the suddenly unwell Lilian Edwards (who had come down with an acute attack of sanity) on a fanzine panel. She found me. Knowing that some in the audience would have come expecting to see Lilian Edwards, I decided that when Abi introduced me I'd say "I may not be as cute as Lilian, but I've got better legs". That should get a cheap laugh. However, no sooner had Abi announced me as Lil's replacement than Martin Tudor had leapt in with "He's got cuter legs", and stolen the cheap laugh for himself. I was amazed. Was this an example of telepathy or had Martin somehow got a look at my legs, which I seldom bare? I think we should be told. (=I= should, anyway.)

The panel was a mess. The editor of *Back Brain Recluse*, a small press SF fiction magazine, was one of the panelists and Abi kept trying to draw parallels between fanzines and small press magazines that just don't exist. The two are entirely different, with fanzines, to my mind, being the superior form. Some idiot in the audience tried to claim that fanzines had once been largely given over to amateur fiction. When I contemptuously demolished that argument he retorted by saying:

"But surely convention reports are just another form of fiction?"

"No", I replied, "magic realism."

This got an appreciative laugh and silenced my questioner, as I'd intended. Convention reports 'another form of fiction' indeed! In fact they are always rigourously accurate and unexaggerated accounts of the proceedings. Just like this one. Still, while up on the stage I'd at last decided what to do about Martin Smith. I found him and told him about the convention report I'd be writing as the first step in my plan for him.

"Martin", I told him, "I'm going to make you a fannish legend."

"You bastard", said Martin Smith.

2. | MY FAN GROUP AND OTHER ANIMALS

Among those reading this there are, I'm sure, quite a few who are members of some sort of group and attend regular meetings of local fans. I'm no exception, so I thought I'd tell you a little about my group.

Every time there's a meeting, the evening begins with me linking up with Martin Smith in London's FORBIDDEN PLANET bookshop on New Oxford Street, and then going for a meal. We always eat in the same place on Thursday evenings, before our fan group meets, and it may well be the only time all week that Martin has a proper meal. Martin, you see, is a single male who lives alone, with all the horror that implies. At home in his cluttered garret he won't eat any dish whose preparation requires the use of anything more complicated than a can-opener. When not feasting on such bachelor favourites as Toast Flambe and Fillet of Spam, Martin will often dine out at Kentucky Fried Chicken. Not that he has the courage of his comestibles, oh no. He will tell you that he knows their food is junk, haughtily insisting that he only eats there when he can't find a McDonald's. (Malcolm Edwards once described Kentucky Fried Chicken as "succulent" and Egg McMuffins as "the perfect food". His taste now guides a major SF line.) No, I've often thought as I tucked into that delicious Mexican food, Martin doesn't know how fortunate he is that we regularly eat at Taco Bell.

We chatted over our food as we always do and, it being August, I complained that I now faced the dreadful prospect of actually having to do something about the back garden, as Avedon and I affectionately think of our weedpatch. Truly, our weeds are strong, healthy and vibrant, the Charles Atlases of the weed world, ready to kick soil in the face of weedier weeds and to laugh cruelly at my attempts to drag them from the ground by musclepower alone.

"It's the neighbours," I explained to Martin, around a mouthful of jalapeno-enhanced bean burrito, "I'm convinced they're feeding my weeds steroids as a lark. But enough is enough. I've already bought some turbo-charged weedkiller, the finest and most lethal known to the British chemical industry, and I'll be launching an assault on the garden with it this weekend. Let's see how the little bastards react to =that=!"

They reacted with total contempt. Come next summer it looks like escalation to flame-throwers and napalm is called for, since my 'garden' is unaffected by cold weather no matter how savage the winter frost might be.

After feasting, Martin and I made our way to The Yorkshire Grey, a pub at the junction of Theobald's Road and Grey's Inn Road that's a mere hundred yards or so from the site of the Red Bull, the pub that that hosted the prewar meetings of fans such as Arthur C. Clarke, Ted Carnell, Bill Temple and John Wyndham. A hundred yards or so in another direction is the site of the Ancient Order of Druid's Memorial Hall, where regular fan meetings were also held and which hosted the first ever London SF conventions in 1938 and 1939. (The site is now occupied by the Aliens Registrations Bureau, curiously enough.) Indeed, the area is so steeped in fanhistory that I originally suggested our little group be called 'The London Fanhistorical Society'. Inexplicably, the others didn't take to this idea, so we eventually settled on 'The Hatton Group' (aka 'The Fanhattonites') after the pub where we first gathered, The Christopher Hatton (itself only twenty yards from the site of The Globe pub, venue for the monthly first Thursday of the month gatherings of London fans from 1953 to 1974).

Though we get occasional visitors, the core of the Hatton Group consists of five individuals, drawn from quite disparate backgrounds. There's nubile young Martin Smith, a sexual opportunist from Croydon; firebrand Armenian-American political activist Avedon Carol, from Washington DC; me, from Wales; our resident Deadhead Fortean gafiote, from Edinburgh, who wishes to remain anonymous; and Cedric Knight - I am not making this name up - who's from Mars. (As an example of how his mind works, it's disturbing for me to realise that despite living in the same area for more than a decade, it wasn't until Cedric pointed it out to me that I noticed how amusing the name our local Underground station - Upton Park - is when read backwards.)

Anecdotes and good conversation are what these meetings are all about, so I started by telling everyone what happened the previous night, when I got back from seeing **Terminator 2**, an enjoyable feast of mindless mayhem.

"When I got in after the film I went to the kitchen and turned the light on. There was a 'plink' as the bulb died. These things happen, I thought to myself as I replaced it. I then put some food on a plate, went through to the lounge, and hit the light switch. 'Plink', went the bulb as it died. Shit. Grumbling even more, I got a new bulb, and a chair so I could reach the light socket. As I stood on the chair there was a loud crack, and it disintegrated into firewood beneath me. Lying on the floor, bulb in hand, I decided that if there is a God then He's got a very juvenile sense of humour."

Needless to say, this story went down well, with Martin Smith laughing particularly hard at my misfortune. He's always doing this lately, no doubt as a result of having been made bitter and twisted by my ruthless expose of his exploits in "**Mexicon 4, Martin Smith 0**" (so titled because he didn't score).

Another regular topic of conversation is politics, and many a world situation has been mercilessly dissected by our fine scientific minds. Recently, an old scandal had been back in the news again, one we'd discussed with undisguised glee on earlier occasions. It was the one that had led to the fall of various US televangelists - Pearlygate - and now that it had raised its head again Avedon cut right to the issue at the heart of the debate about the affairs of Jim and Tammy Bakker.

"God, do you believe that woman's make-up?" she said. "And what's worse, she actually =sells= the stuff on their show."

"She looks," said Martin, "like she puts it on by dunking her head in a bucket of the stuff."

"At least it suggests an obvious title for a book about the whole scandal," I observed.

"What's that?" they asked, taking the bait.

"Texas Chainsaw Mascara," I replied. Their groans were terrible to behold.

"Talking of books," said Martin, smiling the smile of someone about to repeat an old joke, "did you hear that Salman Rushdie's written a new one? It's called 'Buddha, You Fat Bastard'."

"Har har. You know," I reflected, "the last time we heard anything about Rushdie was during the Gulf War."

"God, the Gulf War!" groaned Avedon. "With the collapse of Communism, the US is casting about for new enemies to justify its obscene arms expenditure, which is what the Gulf War was all about. We could carry on invading pushovers like Grenada and Panama, and probably will, but I think the new 'evil empire' is going to be Islam. Not that you need arms to fight Islam. After all, Ayatollah Khomeini declared the fatwa, the death sentence, on Salman Rushdie because '**The Satanic Verses**' was 'a dagger pointed at the heart of Islam'. So you don't need more arms, you need more =books=!"

"No, no," I said, "all that would happen then is that you'd exchange the arms race for a books race. All that government research money would be switched from the physics departments of universities to the literature departments in a ceaseless quest to develop ever more deadly books."

"Have you read any of the books that come out of the literature departments of universities now?" asked Avedon. "Most of them are pretty deadly already."

"", mumbled Cedric.

"The whole language of war would have to alter," I declared, warming to my subject. "Instead of kilotonnage we'd have to start talking in terms of kilopunnage, and instead of technicians the military colleges would have to start turning out semioticians. There would be escalation on both sides, and Strategic Book Limitation Talks would eventually have to be held in order to break the deadlock, the 'balance of terror' embodied in the acronym MAD, or..."

"Don't say it!" said Martin, who suddenly saw where this was leading.

"...Mutual Assured Deconstruction."

The groan that rose from the others then was the most satisfying of the evening. We continued in this vein, and in several others, for the rest of the meeting until, shortly before closing time, I made a comment I no longer recall but which must have been a real humdinger since it caused Avedon to retort:

"Soon you'll be telling me that there's something in the old superstition that a menstruating woman shouldn't stand anywhere near a cornfield 'cos she'll make the crops die."

"No," I replied, "but next time it's - ah - time, could you go and stand in the back garden? You could save us a fortune in weedkiller."

She didn't, of course.

3. | NOVACONDOM

The scoreboard told you all you needed to know about the quality of the snooker being played. It read 50-43 and there were still red balls on the table. Most of them, in fact. Sighting along his cue, Jimmy White lined up the next red – and missed. He not only missed the red he also almost missed the white, the tip of his cue giving it a glancing blow that caused it to trickle an inch or so to the right. I smiled. What I was watching was the annual match between James White and Norman Shorrock, both of whom have poor eyesight, and it was the profusion of such fouls that had led to the high scores. We were all at NOVACON 21, at The Post House Hotel (formerly The Excelsior) near Birmingham International Airport and I was on the adjacent snooker table. I played games against Bob Shaw and Martin Smith and, amazingly, lost to both. This was particularly galling in the case of Martin. Though he soon built up a commanding lead, it was obvious that he didn't really know how the game should be played.

"You ought to be ashamed," I told him, "that you came by most of your points because your opponent is playing like a cretin." He just laughed.

Avedon was also in the snooker room, sitting in the window seats and talking to Harry Bond, who was making his first public appearance since moving up to Stoke and in with Joy Hibbert and Dave Rowley some months earlier. He was telling Avedon about his parents, and made a major revelation.

"You're *Jewish!*!" I heard her say in astonishment.

"Hey, Rob," she shouted across the room, "Harry's father waited 'til he was fifteen to tell him he was Jewish!"

"That's nothing," I shot back, "I was sixteen before I found out we were goyim."

When Martin finished me off, still showing a lamentable lack of contrition, I went out into the bar and sat and chatted for a while with Dave Mooring and Sarah Dibb. Dave had done a couple of wonderful illustrations for *Pulp #19* and, having wrestled with a recalcitrant Gestetner over much of the preceeding fortnight, I was able to give him a freshly-printed copy. Michael Ashley joined us and handed me a copy of the latest issue of his fanzine, *Saliromania*, which contained a letter from Lucy Huntzinger explaining how Martin Smith had failed to get laid at the 1990 CORFLU in New York. Once again Lucy had got it wrong, so there and then I decided to write a LoC to *Saliromania* refuting this vile slur on the reputation of British fandom's leading toy-boy. Borrowing a sheet of paper from Dave, I wrote something along the following lines:

'Lucy is wrong. After the convention a woman I met at CORFLU took me home with her and spent the next three days screwing my tiny brains out.'

I signed Martin's name to this and handed it to Ashley, feeling good. I had protected my friend's newly-acquired reputation as a stud, set the record straight, and was secure in the knowledge that I had done exactly what Martin would have wanted me to. I looked forward to his thanks.

Martin, Avedon and I had been among the first arrivals when we got to the hotel late on Friday afternoon. By the evening the place had filled up considerably and I found myself chatting to Pam Wells. We were discussing Harry Bell, a former beau of Pam's and the man with the longest tongue in fandom. With my very own eyes, I'd seen him lick his own nose and – his party piece – slowly reveal the tongue until it was hanging there, like a kipper. I smiled as I recalled this. Not so Pam, who thought I was pulling her leg and would not be convinced otherwise. Then, Linda Krawecka happened by.

"Hey, Linda! Who's got the longest tongue in fandom?" I asked her.

"Harry Bell," she replied without hesitation.

"He never showed it to me when we were together," said Pam, as outraged as only someone who has let opportunity slip through their thighs can be.

The always-debonair Tony Berry was sitting with us, somewhat the worse for drink and wearing a French army uniform circa 1790 (don't ask).

"I don't like Harry Bell" he declared. We were astonished.
"But everyone likes Harry Bell!" we protested. It did no good.

Then Tony revealed what it was he had against Harry Bell, and we all fell about laughing. "What I'm unhappy about," said Tony, "is all this stuff about him moving in with Joy Hibbert."

Don't ever change, Tony. Later that same evening, Harry Bond was seen in the bar wrestling on the floor with famous author Robert Holdstock.

"He's a teddy bear!" Rob was shouting, "A great big macho teddy bear!"

I worry about Holdstock sometimes.

Following the convention Martin would become embroiled in nameless perversions involving the Civil Service but for now he was prowling the hotel hungrily, filled with a great lust for sex and Kentucky Fried Chicken, and with little chance of finding either. This was, after all, a British convention, one with no female fans visiting from Down Under or from North America, and one uniquely ill-suited to people who like eating.

The Post House/Excelsior's major drawback as a convention hotel lies in the fact that it's miles from anywhere, which means that you largely have to depend on hotel when it comes to food. The food served in the bar was both inadequate and ludicrously over-priced (and I speak as someone used to London prices). It cost an arm, a leg and a major organ for something that couldn't be considered more than an appetiser. On the Friday night, Harry Bond drove Martin and me to a fish and chip shop a mile or two from the hotel and we feasted on greasy kebabs, but it was hardly an adequate solution to the food situation. On more than one occasion during the weekend I was to find myself getting hungry with no simple and affordable way of remedying that condition.

Difficulties with food formed something of a motif at this convention, and for many people Saturday started with a wait of up to an hour to be served breakfast in the hotel dining room. Myself, I got lucky, and afterwards spent much of the morning with Chuck Harris, who was visiting the con for a few hours. In the late afternoon, I wandered into the TAFF auction and was just in time to witness an extraordinary spectacle. European TAFF Administrator Pam Wells was auctioning off a box of exotic American condoms, one condom at a time. Remarkably, these were going for two to three pounds each. Even more remarkably, and I am not making this up, the person buying them all was Martin Smith.

"I'm told there's no condom dispenser in the gent's lavatory," said Pam. "So what does it mean when Martin Smith is buying up all the condoms in the hotel?"

What indeed? I had my own suspicions.

"Martin," I said, "you're as pissed as a fart, aren't you?"

"No I'm not!" he responded indignantly, and indeed he did appear to be having less trouble keeping his eyes focussed than he usually does. Then it came to me.

"Of course! This is your way of advertising what a stud you are to the women in the audience and letting them know that you're equipped and ready."

"That's not it at all. I just collect condoms." He was serious. "You're not going to keep them in an album, are you?" I asked him, "Because that isn't what I meant when I told you that condoms were for mounting."

"You bastard!" said Martin Smith.

Having disposed of the individual condoms, Pam proceeded to auction off the box they came in.

"You have to bid for this, Martin", she told him, "You need something to put all those condoms in."

"And something to put them on," I only just stopped myself from blurting out. The line would have got a cheap laugh at Martin's expense, and as such been unfair. No, with his welfare ever uppermost in my thoughts, I was aiming for *quality* laughter at his expense. Only the best is good enough for my buddy Martin.

Shaking my head, I moved on to the main bar and sat with Linda Krawecke, Abi Frost, and Joseph Nicholas. Despite his earlier confident prediction of remaining sober all convention, Joseph was obviously well-stewed. Linda leaned across to me and whispered conspiratorially that she and Abi had taken a collection, one enthusiastically contributed to by everyone they'd approached, in order to buy booze and get Joseph drunk. On starting to feel groggy Joseph had switched from beer to orange juice, never realising that the orange drinks his ministering angels had been fetching him were mostly vodka.

To the uninitiated it might have looked as though Linda and Abi were performing a dastardly deed but in fact they were actively resurrecting a Fine Old Fannish Tradition. Back in the late 1970s, whenever he had drunk too much and fallen asleep (as he frequently did back then), the fun-loving fans of the day would create graffiti on Joseph's face with felt-tips, crayons, and whatever else came to hand. Photographs would of course be taken, and some of these later turned up in places such as the cover of Steve Higgins' *Perihelion #3* (1979). This fine old tradition faded away when Joseph got together with the woefully teetotal Judith Hanna, who wouldn't let us decorate her unconscious spouse and so brought about the decline of British fandom. A whole generation of fannish artists and writers got started in fandom by drawing and writing on Joseph Nicholas, but then Judith arrived on these shores and in one fell swoop closed down this vital training ground for future talent. The results can be seen all about one in British fandom today. You should be ashamed of yourself, Judith Hanna.

Fortunately for lovers of tradition, art enthusiasts, and possibly for the future of fandom-as-we-know-it, Judith wasn't at NOVACON.

Pam Wells came into the bar at just about the point Joseph fell asleep. I told her what was about to happen.

"Oh, goody!" she said, delightedly, "This hasn't happened since before I came into fandom."

It was happening now. Felt-tips, make-up, and crayons were produced and Joseph had soon been painted after the fashion of a New York subway car. Joseph was transformed into a work of art, but such art is ephemeral so, regrettably, photographs had to be taken. I will consider it my duty to look at them as soon as they're available.

Surprisingly, Joseph seemed remarkably chipper the next morning. I told him about Martin cornering the market in condoms at the TAFF auction, at which Martin got a little defensive.

"You always carry a condom!" he accused.

"Of course I do," I replied, "because, as a former Boy Scout, I believe in being prepared. I'm sure you've found yourself in a situation where you're chatting up a woman and the vibes are definitely favourable. All it needs is that little something extra to impress her, something to show her what a funny yet sensitive guy you are. Where would you be at such a moment without something to pull over your head?"

Its little tips like these from their elders that mean so much to younger men. By such methods do we pass on our wisdom, easing the awkwardness they often feel with women and so adding to the sum total of human happiness. Martin looked suitably impressed and I'm sure he'll use this invaluable and proven technique with the very next woman he meets.

When hunger struck, Martin, Joseph and I found ourselves, inevitably, trudging through both the cold November air and piles of wet leaves in order to once again sample the delights of greasy kebab at the fish and chip shop. The last time I brought my own food to a convention was during my days as an impoverished neo in the late 1970s, but if we return to the Excelsior for NOVACON 22 then scrawling on Joseph's face won't be the only tradition from that dear, departed decade that makes a comeback.

The three of us had decided to travel back to London together (Avedon had left the previous afternoon in order to attend some political event) but before leaving we went along to Pam's talk on her TAFF trip. Pam is a pretty good speaker, and certainly a lot more confident on a stage by herself than I've ever been. She was asked what the major difference between British and American conventions was.

"They drink a lot less and screw a lot more," she replied.

Of course they do. American conventions are equipped with cheap food and condom dispensers. But then again, would you rather be having sex or be somewhere that offers you snooker matches between the partially-sighted, wrestling in the bar, the fine old fannish art of Nicholas Decorating, hunger, Tony Berry, and the spectacle of some idiot frantically buying up all the condoms in the hotel?

Yeah, me too.

4. | MARTIN SMITH -- PARTY ANIMAL

It was all Pam Wells' fault. Realising that February 1992 contained five Saturdays, a rare conjunction, she had the idea of organising a party on every one of them. This was dumb. The smart thing would have been to apply for a government grant. Then we could see our tax revenues put to good use on gambling, booze, and fast women. I mean, you or me or Pam Wells could figure out that February 1992 had five Saturdays just by looking at a calendar, but the government regularly gives large sums of money to teams of researchers who then spend years looking into things like this before announcing their findings, which are always something anyone in the street could've told them before they started. In fact, I'm sure they *do* ask someone in the street before they start. Then they spend the grant money on gambling, booze, and fast women.

So anyway, after figuring out this stuff about the five Saturdays (without the aid of a government grant), Pam then gave the franchise for the parties to fans the length and breadth of Britain. Somehow, Avedon and I ended up with the fourth party, which was held on the Saturday closest to the twenty-ninth birthday of Junior Stud (Second Class) Martin Smith. This was the ostensible reason for the party, at any rate, and how we were talked into hosting it here at the rolling acres of Gross Manor in the first place. Why wasn't it held at Martin's place? Well, in the tiny garret where he lives amid typical bachelor squalor there's barely even enough room for Martin, an ardent gaming fan, to play his frequent games of pocket pool.

The party went off pretty well and we had a good turnout. Among those who showed up were John and Eve Harvey, Cedric Knight (who really *does* exist), Pam Wells, Californian fans Allen Baum & Donya White, and Birmingham's Bernie Evans. These last four had hit all the parties and were determined to miss none. No-one was going to stop them earning their merit badges, no siree. Avedon, as usual, spent the party in intense discussion. She had appeared on 'Kilroy' (which, I should explain to non-UK readers, is a TV show not unlike 'Donahue') a few weeks earlier, discussing pornography as a member of Feminists Against Censorship, and had invited along one of the people who had been on the show with her. Zak Jane Keir, a pornographer friend of ours, was also present, as was Martin's brother, Roland, who was highly amused by the way Martin's name was dropped, and what it was dropped into, in 'Novacondom' (see preceding piece). As for Martin, he quickly got well-oiled and spent the rest of the party leering at various women in what he fondly imagined to be seductive fashion.

By the end of the evening Martin was, quite literally, bouncing off the walls. In the process he destroyed a glass, broke a clock, and severely alarmed Allen Baum. Martin, you see, had decided to use the occasion to conduct a serious scientific experiment. This required him to consume vast quantities of an improbably wide array of alcoholic beverages in an attempt to produce a new shade of vomit. As far as I was concerned he succeeded. Never before had I seen that particular shade of cerise. And how well it showed up against the white of his shirt!

It was a strangely subdued Martin Smith who accompanied Avedon and me over to north London the following day. He looked pale and drawn, and after the excesses of the previous night the Duke of Puke was of course wearing borrowed clothes. The three of us had been invited to a dinner party that Joseph Nicholas and Judith Hanna were throwing. My invitation had read: "Tovarich Rob, you are invited to a Perestroika dinner party at Frinton Road Avian Nutrition & Historiographical Autonomous Republic" and had included a menu that listed the culinary delights on offer as "baklazhannya ikra, pirozhki, kapusta, bliny, kulebaya, solyanka, shchi, borscht, boiled baby, plov, sharlotka, stuff". And very tasty it all was, too, though the boiled baby could have used a bit more salt. As well as we three and our hosts, also present were Pam, John & Eve, Ian & Janice Maule (making their annual contact with fandom), and Aussie fans Perry Middlemiss and Robyn Mills.

Despite there being no Kentucky Fried Chicken on offer, Martin managed to force down a half-dozen platefuls of the dishes provided, which caused me some concern - I'd never seen him off his food like this before. Not even the sight of Joseph really getting into the music issuing from the hi-fi and leaping about playing air guitar (I accompanied him on air Jew's harp) seemed able to cheer him up. Martin had been much troubled lately. Some time back, at one of the regular Thursday night meetings of our group, he'd confessed his worries to us, his closest friends. He'd had so much sex, he told us, over such a short period of time and has had so little since (none, in fact) that he was afraid he'd used up his lifetime's allocation. All he could see ahead of him was a future filled with cold showers and pocket pool. Listening to this heartfelt admission, hearing the worry in Martin's voice, we did the only thing that friends could do in such a situation, and laughed uproariously.

This wasn't why Martin was looking glum now, though. No, it was the thought of all the alcohol that had been wasted before it could properly percolate through his liver, and the knowledge that his shirt was soaking in a bucket. Still, I'd figured out how to cheer him up. All I had to do was get him a government grant to continue his vomit research.

Then again, maybe not.

5. | HANGING OUT AT THE HINCKLEY HILTON

How often have you read convention reports full of side-splittingly hilarious anecdotes about the antics of bunches of wacky, fun-loving fans and thought to yourself: "Who the hell are these people, anyway?" Recognising the problem, this piece includes, at no cost or use to the reader, a selective *Dramatis Personae*:

- Sarah Prince - Toothsome Bostonian. Likes chewy young Englishmen.
- Jack Henegan - Irish ancestry. Velcro hair.
- Vicki Rosenzweig - Bubbly, bouncy, rarely without a smile. (Makes you sick, doesn't it?)
- D. Potter - Tall.
- Denial - A river in Egypt.
- Mark Richards - Appears darkly brooding, even when he isn't. Reputed to be a dead ringer for Elvis under all that hair. Maybe he *is* Elvis. Should be photographed behind a supermarket checkout, and made to sing 'Heartbreak Hotel' at his next con, so we can decide for ourselves before calling The Enquirer.
- Vijay Bowen - Dark and slender. In certain situations is so energetic that she could, via the miracle of jump-leads, be used to power a number of major electrical appliances.
- Martin Smith - English. Chewy.
- Avedon Carol - Talented, dynamic, legendary, capable of doing dreadful things to the writer while he sleeps if she doesn't like what he's written.

I take my responsibilities as Martin Smith's fannish mentor very seriously indeed but, being the ungrateful wretch he is, Martin is often woefully unappreciative of my efforts on his behalf, as anyone who has read my earlier accounts of his ongoing fannish education will know only too well. Still, we were at an American convention and, since I know American fandom better than he does, I decided to give Martin the benefit of my knowledge.

"The best way for you to break the ice at a room party and get yourself noticed," I told him, "is for you to drop your trousers, bend over, and offer your services as a novelty bottle-opener."

Martin wasn't terribly enthusiastic about this idea, even after I assured him that the bottle-caps could be easily removed later by any competent proctologist, which just goes to show what a stick-in-the-mud he can be. I don't understand his attitude. At various points during the con I told other people about my suggestion for Martin and they all thought it was a good idea too, so what was his problem?

It was May 1992, Memorial Day Weekend, and we were at DISCLAVE. The hotel we were in was the Washington DC Hilton and Towers but known to all and sundry as the Hinckley Hilton, this being where John Hinckley Jr had failed to assassinate Ronald Reagan, noted amnesiac and President, a decade earlier, thus dooming the US economy. (One of my time-travel fantasies is to switch the guns used by Hinckley and by Mark Chapman.)

If the con had a definite starting point for me then it was out on the poolside patio where, despite the canopy, it was blisteringly hot. Here Avedon and I chewed the fat with Jack Henegan, and Vol & Jay Haldeman, later being joined by Martin, Linda Bushyager, Moshe Feder, Lise Eisenberg, and Bill Wagner. Strange to see those New Yorkers and not see Stu Shiffman, but he and Andi have long since relocated to Seattle and couldn't be with us. We missed you, people.

Fish are fine if you're a seal, but I've never considered them fit for human consumption. So it was that when Avedon organised a dinner party to a sea'food' restaurant, Martin and I slipped out to sample the greasy delights of the nearby Hardee's burger emporium, which is where we bumped into local fan Walter Miles. Now Walter is, I'm sure, a splendid fellow, but be wary of accepting medical advice from this man. His ideas on the taking of medication are not merely odd but downright peculiar. I became aware of his unorthodox views a few days earlier when we played cards at Avedon's folks' house. In the middle of the game, I was suddenly stricken with a bout of wind that felt like a fatal heart attack. Avedon fetched a bottle of antacid and I quickly uncapped it, unaware that I was about to trip over a Cultural Difference. I upended the opaque plastic bottle in order to shake out a couple of antacid tablets...and watched stupidly as the contents of the bottle, the *liquid* contents,

sloshed out into my hand and all over the table. Avedon did just what you expect in such a situation from the person who has promised to honour and cherish you, and who respects and looks up to you: she collapsed in helpless giggles. Not wanting to dignify such unseemly behaviour with a response I turned to Walter, who'd sat calmly through the whole incident, and demanded to know why he hadn't stopped me.

"I thought," he said, adopting the sort of tone one uses when explaining something obvious to a small child, "that you were pouring it into your hand so that you could lap it up."

Avedon thinks Walter would have women all over him if he grew his hair out and lost his moustache, a strategy that would almost certainly have also worked for Martin Smith. If Martin didn't already have long hair, that is. And no moustache. Tough luck, Martin.

With Walter in Hardee's was Joe Mayhew, organiser of the Disclub, a socialising area that was essentially a large con-suite with free soda on tap and, from eight 'til midnight every evening, free beer. As well as the obligatory lager, the Disclub also carried a different dark beer every night. On Friday night this was Old Dominion, which wasn't at all bad, and I quaffed my first glass of it with Alexis Gilliland shortly after the bar area opened. People were still arriving at DISCLAVE at this point, and two who turned up while I was in the Disclub were Vijay Bowen, who gave me a big hug, and Mark Richards. It was getting late now and the parties were starting, so we decided to check them out.

The most enjoyable of the parties was the one Moshe and Lise traditionally throw on the first night of a convention, so we hung out with them for a couple of hours. Martin had yet to loosen up, and seemed a little out of things.

"There's only one way you're going to get into the swing of things," I said.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Why, by offering your services as a novelty bottle-opener, of course."

"No way," said Martin.

He was determined to be difficult about this.

I breakfasted with Martin in Hardee's the following morning, after which I wandered into the Disclub. Here, to my great surprise, I encountered Hope Kiefer. She and husband Karl now live in nearby Philadelphia, having moved there from mythical Madison. They were here with another couple (whose names I failed to record in my diary), and raising funds (for something I also forgot to record) by selling plates of food. Following a brief chat with Hope and Co., I spent a couple of hours discussing many things, but mainly World War II, with Mark Richards, and a couple more chatting to Ted & Linda White, rich brown, Dan and Lynn Steffan, Steve & Elaine Stiles, Lenny Bailes, and Walter Miles. Also, somewhere in there, I talked fanhistory with Dick Lynch, who was doing a lot of work on the long overdue book edition of Harry Warner's **A WEALTH OF FABLE**. From this list you might assume that I was really getting into DISCLAVE, but in fact I felt oddly and inexplicably out of things most of Saturday, detached and dissatisfied. It wasn't until the evening's disco that I finally felt part of the convention again.

Dancing has always been one of life's great joys for me, and before discovering fandom I used to hit the discos of Cardiff, my home town, two or three nights a week with a friend who felt the same about dancing. If we met women, that was a bonus, but the dancing was always the main thing. Ten years ago I could dance all night, only missing those numbers I actively disliked, but no longer. Someone who still can, and who did at the DISCLAVE disco, is Vijay Bowen. We danced, but I could manage no more than five consecutive tracks at a time before needing a break. I was stiff as a board when I woke the next morning, but it was worth it. Thanks, Vijay.

By the time the disco was over, and it was time to party, I was drenched. Multiple rivulets of perspiration were running down my face, and I knew what that meant. I have 'unfortunate' hair. It looks alright when I've just washed it, but within hours it starts getting wilder and wilder, gradually twisting into shapes that are, so I'm assured, highly amusing. Soaked with sweat after the disco my hair looked merely risible but within a few hours, as it dried, it would cause great laughter among Martin Smith. Or maybe not. At the tartan-laden Glasgow In '95 party (they even had on display, I swear, a tartan Rubik's Cube) he didn't seem to notice my hair, possibly because he was so intent on troughing down the snacks on offer. The party, though enjoyable, was pretty quiet, a situation I was sure Martin could change.

"What this party needs to liven it up...." I began.

"Forget it, Rob," said Martin, with uncharacteristic forcefulness, "I'm not being a novelty bottle-opener for anyone!"

"Not even," I coaxed, "if I get the ball rolling by producing a bottle of beer and saying: 'Get your farting gear around *that*'?"

"No, Rob, not even then."

I woke the next morning as Martin was rising (Avedon was already up and about) and couldn't quite believe what I was seeing. I tried rubbing the sleep from my eyes, but it made no difference. I would never have expected such a thing, such aberrant behaviour, of an adult human being, but there was no denying the evidence of my own eyes:

Martin was wearing pyjamas.

"Martin," I told him, "you're wearing pyjamas."

He was unshocked by this revelation, which destroyed my final faint hope that he'd been abducted by alien tailors while he slept.

"I always wear pyjamas," he replied, not even slightly embarrassed. Of course, if alien tailors *had* abducted him they could also have worked on his brain. (I always thought it needed a little darning, and maybe a new hem.) But no; I was clutching at straws.

"God, Martin," I said, disgustedly, "sometimes you can be so *English!*"

I was shaken. For all I knew Martin had other secret vices. Maybe **shudder** he plays golf.

Golf, I'm convinced, is just an excuse for usually sensible people to wear hideous trousers. In much the same way, SF conventions provide an excuse for people even more sensible than golfers (you never see a fan using a long stick and vast amounts of energy to send small clumps of earth a few feet, after all) to dress as warrior women, space troopers, barbarians, and otherwise prance around in leather. Though not usually one for costumes, at least not outside the bedroom, I decided to wear one on this Sunday: namely, a Green Lantern ring.

Green Lantern, I should explain for the culturally-deprived, is a comic book character responsible for policing the sector of space containing our solar system. Armed with a power ring, a wondrous device he recharges daily while reciting an oath composed by Alfred Bester (no kidding), he's the nemesis of evildoers everywhere. The ring I was wearing was a promotional item from those canny people at DC Comics, who sure know their audience (the rings come in one size only and are sized for an adult male finger). The real joy in wearing the ring came from the way Moshe, another Green Lantern fan from way back, faunched after it. I saw him casting covetous glances at it all day until, able to stand it no longer, he announced that, by God, he was going to march into the offices of DC Comics when he got back to New York and *demand* they give him one. (These New Yorkers can be soooooo macho when they're roused.) I allowed myself a smile, but it was a small victory. After a couple of years of practicing manipulation on Martin Smith this was no more than a finger exercise.

Sunday passed in a blur of the usual convention activities, including some that are None Of Your Damn Business, so I'll fast forward through the day until around 10.30 pm, when I was emerging from my hotel room and making my way to the Disclub. Which seems an appropriate point in this narrative to say a few words about one of the most pressing problems facing the modern world...

There is a dread scourge sweeping the globe today, one we've all been made aware of on TV and one every one of us should take all the steps we can to avoid, and yet it's something that any of might have to face one day. I'm talking, of course, about alcohol-free beer. Fortunately, the Disclub would have no truck with this foul abomination and was serving another perfectly acceptable dark beer. Unfortunately, I consumed two of these before remembering that booze plays havoc with my medication. I was taking one antihistamine pill a night, which I washed down with water (take *that*, Walter Miles!), and they were definitely less effective in the presence of alcohol so, regretfully, I switched to Coke.

Monday was the final morning of DISCLAVE, and I woke too late for breakfast at Hardee's. Avedon was also awake so we made our way down to the hotel's lounge area and left Martin to his snoring. We sat around talking with Mark, Vijay, Sarah Prince, D. Potter, Vicki Rosenzweig and Andy Hickmott, having conversations that were extended farewells to people we wouldn't be seeing again for a year or more, and discussing the foibles of absent friends. My casual revelation that Martin slept in pyjamas was greeted with incredulous laughter. Reactions ranged from "What?", "How?", and "Why?" to "Where?", "When?" and "Is he some sort of pervert?" Events then unfolded with regrettable inevitability.

"They didn't believe me when I told them about the pyjamas," I explained to the groggy figure sitting on the end of the bed, as cameras flashed all around us, "so I - ah - organised a private viewing."

"You bastard!" Martin Smith would normally have said at this point but, still sleepy and bemused, all he could manage was a sickly smile.

We all thought this was pretty funny except for Martin, who really has little reason for complaint. I only brought seven people to the room, and I doubt that the photos they took will be seen by more than a couple of hundred people. And among those, after all, there probably won't be more than a handful of women he would otherwise have stood a chance with.

Later that morning, Martin was being sought by someone who wanted him to spend the night with her. Typically, he was nowhere to be found. Avedon was also off somewhere, but we remaining members of the pyjama party got treated to a floor-show back in the lounge area. It started when our conversation was interrupted by the thwack of leather on flesh. As one we turned, and watched while a young guy, who was stripped to the waist and stretched out over the back of a chair, was whipped by a young woman until his bare back glowed red. Conversation slowly died at the other tables in the lounge as everyone turned to watch the spectacle. Midway through this a second young woman joined in and both carried on whipping him until he groaned: "You'd better stop or I'll need a cold shower." At this point they put a collar and leash on him and led him around the room with one of them riding him and applying gentle strokes to his enflamed back. While watching these three we were distracted by another loud thwack, and turned to see a second bare-backed guy stretched out over a chair, with yet another woman whipping him. I could hardly believe it.

"You never see that at British cons," I commented.

"You don't usually see it at American cons either," said Vicki.

"Yeah...*three* female tops in one small group!"

The final, dying moments of a convention are an odd time to meet someone new, but this was when Avedon produced a Mysterious Person who just happened to have dropped in on the con, a desperado from her misspent pre-fannish youth whose name even she didn't recall. Of an earlier dwelling of his, Avedon said:

"I lost my virginity in a house full of bikers and Twinkies."

People sometimes speak in tongues, but this was the first time I'd heard anyone speak in interlineos. The bikers, it seemed, had ripped-off box after box of the Twinkies months earlier and these had subsequently been available to anyone who could keep them down. Twinkies, Avedon once explained to me, are these weird chemical-based things that bear a superficial resemblance to food and which keep forever. I ate one once, years ago. It felt really peculiar going down, and sat in my stomach like ballast. It's probably still there. The longevity of Twinkies is such that had they existed in ancient Egypt, a country on the banks of Denial, those left in the pyramids would be no more inedible today than when they were made. Isn't that amazing? Also, and I am not making this up, the eating of Twinkies has been successfully used in America as a defense in a murder trial. Twinkies are Ronald Reagan's favourite food. This may explain a lot.

There was no denying that DISCLAVE was, finally, over. Filled with post-con melancholia, Sarah, Martin, the Mysterious Person, Jack Henegan, Walter Miles, Avedon, and I made our way to the main entrance of the Hinckley Hilton and stood out on the sidewalk, waiting for Avedon's parents to turn up and whisk Avedon and I off to a restaurant and to probably the best meal I had the whole trip (chicken teryaki, if you must know). It was a time for wistful goodbyes, for kisses from the women and manly hugs from the guys. Martin wasn't coming back to Avedon's folks' place with us but was setting off by himself, armed with little more than his toothbrush and a fresh pair of pyjamas, with a view to spending some time in New York.

"If you're lucky they might throw a party for you there," I told him, "and if they do, I know the perfect way for you to break the ice...."

6. | THE LAST 'TON

*(Author's Note: When I got a letter from **Trapdoor** editor Robert Lichtman, saying he had been "...wanting to have stuff on family, relationships, and fandom especially if there are any Cosmic Conclusions (of whatever kind) you can draw from it..." I naturally rushed straight to the wordprocessor and bashed out an article that is none of these things. It was the least I could do. This is that piece.)*

In 1924, during the early days of radio, the BBC asked for permission to broadcast the wedding of Queen Elizabeth II's parents, the Duke and Duchess of York. This was quite impossible, declared the Palace, on the grounds that...

"Disrespectful persons may listen in pubs - with their hats on."

The fans who regularly gather at London's famous first-Thursday pub meetings certainly count as 'disrespectful persons' and few there are in these less formal times who would doff their hats for royalty and respectfully tug their foreskins. Not that most possess one, of course. (Hats, that is - this isn't America.)

The Wellington Tavern, a pub opposite Waterloo Station, is the latest in a long line of pubs that London fans have met in on Thursday nights that stretches all the way back to the Red Bull in August 1938. The Red Bull is no longer with us, alas, having been destroyed in 1941 during the extensive programme of urban demolition then being carried out by A. Hitler & Co. The meetings resumed after the war, first in The Shamrock (for one meeting only), then in The White Horse (later immortalised by Arthur C. Clarke in his 'Tales From The White Hart'), The Globe, The One Tun and, currently, in The Wellington. The One Tun was known to one and all as "the Tun" so, fans being just as nostalgic and sentimental as they would vehemently deny being, The Wellington is known to everyone as "the 'Ton". Though not, as I write, for much longer.

It was 6th August 1992, and the night of The Last 'Ton, not that I knew that as I exited Waterloo station and crossed the road to The Wellington, home of the first-Thursday gatherings of London fans since February 1987. The pub seemed unusually crowded. Then I noticed that a third of it had been walled off.

"They're turning that bit into a wine bar," explained Alan Dorey.

"A real smart move now that the yuppies have all vanished."

Indeed. I was surprised to see Dorey, who hadn't attended one of these in years, but it soon became clear that he wasn't the only non-regular in tonight. Judith Hanna, who seldom shows up on first-Thursdays, arrived with Leigh Edmonds and Valma Brown, who never do. Since they live twelve thousand miles away I suppose they can be excused this otherwise unforgivable lapse. Another non-regular making an appearance was Michael Ashley who had come down from Leeds to drum up support for his TAFF candidacy according to Alun Harries, a local fan with a passing resemblance to Woody Allen.

"So he's down here to press the flesh and kiss babies?" I said

"Not babies," said Alun. "He wants to kiss *babes!*"

I like a TAFF candidate with a strong fantasy life.

In the half-century since the first meeting in The Red Bull these gatherings have attracted as regulars all the major British pros and fans of that period, people such as Arthur C. Clarke, Michael Moorcock, Chuck Harris, Arthur Thomson, Bill Temple, Bob Shaw, Roger Peyton, Greg Pickersgill, Leroy Kettle, Simone Walsh, Pat & Graham Charnock, Malcolm Edwards, John Clute, Linda Krawecka, Avedon Carol (my sweetie), Kevin Smith, Chris Evans, Ken Bulmer, John Jarrold, - the list is endless - all of whom I think of in some way, God help me, as family. Some of us may not see each other that often, and our relationships can be just as fractious as those between real-life siblings, yet despite that there's a strong and undeniable sense of community and, yes, sometimes even love, that's as important to me now as it's ever been.

Two of the nicest guys I know, and among the people in our community I value the most, are 'Ton regulars Vince Clarke and Dave Langford. As usual, Dave was handing out copies of his monthly news and scandal sheet, **Ansible** (which is only otherwise available for a stamped & self-addressed envelope, or as a reprinted column in **Interzone**). By way of trade I gave him a surplus copy of my apazine, **Born In The UK**, which carried a piece about my fan buddy Martin Smith, the latest in a

series that describes his ongoing fannish education with great sensitivity. Martin was chatting with Zak Jane Keir, our friendly neighbourhood pornographer, so I wandered over and joined them.

More than anything, first-Thursdays are about good conversation and 'family' gossip and I listened raptly as Zak, who works for **Penthouse UK** and who, like Avedon, is a member of local pressure group Feminists Against Censorship, told us all about a new magazine she'll be editing. Looming over us – at his height he looms over everyone – was up and coming author Geoff Ryman, who pointed at Martin and shook his head (his own, not Martin's).

"Lately," he said, "all I seem to hear about wherever I go is this man's sex life."

"That's 'cos I write about it," I explained. "I'm his press agent."

"Unpaid," added Martin, hastily forestalling any speculation as to the exact nature of my ten per cent.

"Only because I'm such a warm humanitarian," I countered. "For my next piece, I'm going to write all about those kinky civil service parties you go to. I think I'll call it 'Crops and Rubbers'."

Everyone groaned at this except Martin Smith, who actually managed a small laugh, his eyes twinkling the twinkle of a man debating whether he should get into the spirit of things by giving me a playful smack in the teeth.

"Actually, I've just seen some very explicit pictures of me from the last party," said Martin. "I complimented the guy who took them on how well he'd developed them, only he told me that he had in fact got them done at a photo-lab. It's amazing they actually printed them."

Sometimes, his naiveté astonishes me. Martin obviously had no idea what they do at photo-labs when they get pictures of someone like him *in flagrante delicto* (an old Latin phrase, "in flagrante" translating as "committing unnatural acts" and "delicto" as "with a seventeen-stone rugby player"). I decided to break it to him gently.

"You asshole!" I said. "I thought everyone knew that photo-lab technicians routinely make extra copies of any salacious pictures that come their way and sell them on to sleazy European sex mags."

"That's right," agreed Zak, our resident expert in matters nether regional.

Martin looked unconvinced, and all but oblivious to the potential embarrassment he faces when those pictures surface. How's he going to feel when his maiden aunt comes across one in **Spank?** (Title is anglicised here. Actual title is, of course, **Le Spanque**.) Or when an unscrupulous and unprincipled fanzine editor reprints one on the cover of a future **Born In The UK?** I'll tell you how he's going to feel – really pleased, that's how. And why I'm so sure is it was about here that he grinned that dopey grin of his and made a grisly revelation that chilled me to the bone.

"All the exposure you've given me in those fanzine pieces you wrote over the last year," he said, "have definitely made me more interesting to female fans."

Incredibly, my sensitive descriptions of his ongoing fannish education, in which I portray him as somewhere between being a sexual sophisticate and a clueless cretin, have improved his stock in this area considerably. As his mentor, and with his welfare ever uppermost in my mind, I am of course pleased to have wrought this miracle. Yeah, right.

For quite some time now, Martin has been threatening to 'respond' to those pieces of mine with some of his own, featuring me. Maybe this isn't quite the horrible idea I thought it was after all.

And that was that. It had been another fascinating evening of serious scientific discussion here in London, replete, as you can see, with the fiercely cerebral discourse that has made us the envy of fandom worldwide. Yet, it was also a sad occasion, for this was the last 'Ton. The alterations to the pub mean that it's now too small, so in future we'll be meeting at one near Liverpool Street station. Let's hope that at this venue too, we shall be able to enjoy the spectacle of fans focussing their mighty intellects on such vital questions as the future of the genre and what to do about semiotics. (I recommend penicillin.)

Cosmic conclusions? Never trust a photo-lab technician; be careful what you write about someone – such writing can produce bizarre results; be sure to pick up the next issue of SPANK; and life is like an aubergine.

((Afterword: Unfortunately, the new pub didn't work out so we moved again... back to the Wellington. As I write – May '96 – we're still there. RH))

((More Up-To-Date Afterword: We eventually left the Wellington again and currently – June '98 – meet in the Jubilee, about a half mile away from it. RH.))

7. | NEWSHOUNDS OF THE YORKSHIRE GREY

"According to today's paper," said Avedon, "the idea that men now split the housework evenly with their partners is a myth. Most still do no more than fifteen percent of the total."

"That's all I do," agreed Martin.

"Wait a minute," I said, "you're still single."

"That's right," he grinned, "so you can imagine what my flat looks like."

When it comes to odd news items, the Thursday night meetings of our local fan group at the Yorkshire Grey pub in London's Holborn are like a bring-and-buy affair. The four or five regulars constitute an intrepid band of amateur news analysts, sifting through dozens of stories each week in a ceaseless quest for truth, integrity, and a few cheap laughs. On these evenings we've pondered the significance of such stories as that of the man arrested in America last year for driving around naked in his car and flinging lard at women passers-by. What early influences, we wondered, what childhood terror, could lead a man to launch lard at women? The answer, of course, is cabbage. Back in 1988, we had pondered the case of Cyril Casson of Doncaster, England, who was knocked off his bike by a cabbage thrown from a passing car. As a newspaper reported at the time:

"Cyril's wife, Jean, 54, said: 'Used like this, a cabbage can be a terrible weapon. Poor Cyril's not slept a wink since he came back from the hospital. Cabbage was his favourite veg once - but not anymore.'"

In 1988, in Britain, it was cabbages. In America, in 1991, it was lard. A coincidence, perhaps? I think not. Almost certainly, this is the tip of a problem of international dimensions - and someone is trying to cover it up. After all, how likely is it that no one in the regular press made the same connection as our beer-sodden group? What we may have stumbled across is a sinister conspiracy between reporters and shadowy figures in the international farming community to keep the public ignorant of the increasing risk they face from flying foodstuffs. It doesn't take much imagination to see how the farm lobby could bring its formidable resources to bear. Reporters who played ball would be plied with as much dairy produce and root vegetables as anyone could possibly want, while those who didn't might find themselves lured to motel rooms and photographed in compromising positions with sheep. What reporters would fear most, however, is being made the target of a 'hit' by farming industry bosses. Their trepidation will be understood by anyone who has ever witnessed the awesome power of a manure sprayer.

Fortean Times, Comic Relief, Midweek, and certain newspapers are our main sources for these items, and where Avedon had come across her statistical tidbit. As it happens, all the newspapers that week were full of the sexual shenanigans of Heritage Minister David Mellor - dubbed 'Minister of Fun' by the press - who was reputed to have made love to his mistress five times one night while wearing the shirt of Chelsea soccer team. The next time Mellor went to watch a Chelsea match, the crowd had cheered him.

"I work with a Chelsea fan," I told the others, "and I asked him why they cheered Mellor. 'Because,' he explained to me, 'it's a long time since anyone last scored five times in a Chelsea shirt.'"

David Mellor eventually had to resign since the affair was bringing the government into disrepute, something that most of us thought that things such as their arms sales to Iraq and gross economic mismanagement had already long since accomplished. What a shame that Prime Minister John Major didn't have the chutzpah of Winston Churchill who, when faced with a similar sex scandal involving a particularly elderly member of his cabinet, defused the situation by declaring, impishly: "Makes you proud to be British!"

There was another story in the papers that same week that had caused much amusement. Here's how one of them reported it:

"No-one uttered even a mild complaint when a half-naked couple had sex on a crowded train. But then they went too far. They lit up cigarettes in a non-smoking carriage. Incensed passengers called the guard and John Henderson, 29, and Zoe D'Arcy, 19, were frogmarched off by police, a court heard yesterday. The couple were returning from a Sainsbury warehouse workers' Bank Holiday outing to Margate when their passions got the better of them. After one sex romp in a first class carriage, they moved into a standard class compartment crowded with families, for a repeat performance. But everyone just averted their eyes.

'It was only on lighting up that the witnesses actually came up to them and complained,' Mr Nazir Afzal, prosecuting, told Horseferry Road magistrates in Central London. They were each fined 50 pounds with 25 pounds costs after admitting committing an indecent act and smoking in a non-smoking carriage."

"Typical!" snorted Avedon, our resident American, on reading this.

"Yeah," I agreed, ruefully "we Brits are basically a very law-abiding people who believe in following the rules, so what happened is not surprising. After all, the carriage that pair lit up in was marked 'No Smoking', not 'No Sex'."

"Plus," added Martin, with suspicious authority, "in Soho you'd pay a lot of money to see a show like that."

Even in a story such as this, however, the subject of 'class' rears its ugly head. Typically, as another report revealed, the families in the standard class carriage had to make do with watching straightforward fornication, while those in first class were treated to a display of oral sex.

The *Guardian* had an interesting quote from Pat Robertson:

"Feminism is a socialist, anti-family movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism, and become lesbians."

"It's true," said Avedon, "it's all true!"

The news item most enthusiastically received that evening was one I got from the TV. Being a news junkie, I can't always wait for the next newscast. At such times I turn the TV on, but instead of viewing a regular channel I call up one of the teletext services and click through their news pages. Imagine my delight when I came across the following headline in the index:

BUNGEE WEDDING SHOCKS SANTA CLAUS

What's amazing about this headline is that it fails to mention the Elvis impersonator. The story, as I discovered when I called up the relevant page of teletext, concerns a couple who were married by an Elvis impersonator on a bridge in the town of Santa Claus, Indiana. After he pronounced them man and wife they leapt off the bridge on bungee lines. Questioned about this later the woman said:

"It wasn't a traditional wedding, but then we're not traditional people. We're pretty cool, actually."

'Fraid not. The *really* cool thing would have been for all three to have leapt off the bridge at the *start* of the proceedings. Imagine a ceremony with the bride, the groom, and the officiating Elvis carrooming past each other at high speed. As a serious news aficionado, I for one would have shelled out real money for a videotape of this important development in matrimonial procedure. Also, assuming he caught the King's invitation to do so as he went whizzing by, it would be wonderful to see the groom attempt to kiss the bride while trying to avoid severe concussion. Why, such a videotape could become a vital part of journalism courses and office parties.

By the way, did you know that the ever-growing army of Elvis impersonators includes a Welsh Sikh? No kidding. I saw this guy on TV a few years ago, looking splendid in his Elvis outfit and turban. He gave Presley's repertoire his own - ah - unique spin, performing such well-loved classics as 'My Poppadom Told Me.'

Still, as I sit here scribbling this in a first class rail carriage - I've lately taken to riding the train in a Chelsea shirt - I've decided there's at least one thing wrong with the guy: I bet he doesn't do more than fifteen percent of the housework.

8. | JUST ANOTHER NOVACON

If it was November this must be Birmingham, and so it was. More by accident than design, I had attended sixteen consecutive NOVACONS and now it was 1992 and here I was at the seventeenth in that unbroken run, NOVACON 22. Avedon and I arrived late on the Friday afternoon, still elated by Democratic challenger Bill Clinton's victory in the US Presidential election, earlier that same week. We had both stayed up late into the night, following the superb BBC studio coverage and the on-the-spot reports from their US correspondent, Martin Sixsmith. Having watched the candidates in all the televised debates, and sat through hours of the party conventions, and thought deeply about the issues, our considered message to the Republicans is: "Yah boo sucks!"

We were far from being the first arrivals at NOVACON, or the last. One of the latest arrivals was the newly-married Nigel Rowe, sans his bride, Karen Babich. Karen had returned to her native Chicago where Nigel would be joining her shortly before Xmas. Their celebratory bash had been held at our palatial home due to Nigel's bachelor flat having about as much room the average nostril. And less tasteful furnishings. Unfortunately, one of the guests disgraced himself in a way qualitatively identical to, but quantitatively so much worse than during his last visit to our home back in February. This second, and final bout (it had better be) earned him the nickname of 'Martin SickSmith'. Should there ever be a third bout, expect to see a tabloid headline like this the next day:

NUKE OF PUKE KOOK NO FLUKE

"It was justifiable homicide!" claims Armenian-American woman.

This year NOVACON was back at The Royal Angus Hotel which I, like most people, think is it's natural home, even though NOVACONS held in other hotels have provided fine entertainment such as the sight of Martin Smith bidding furiously for exotic American condoms during the TAFF auction. Like old soldiers returning to the scene of their finest triumphs, veterans of earlier NOVACONS held in the Angus waxed nostalgic about the old girl. Martin was one of those who spoke feelingly of his last visit to this hallowed fannish shrine, and how it helped make him the fan he is today.

"It was at the last NOVACON held in this very hotel," he said, choking back what I hope was emotion, "that I threw up in the bar."

Martin and Nigel were both staying in the overflow hotel (which, in Martin's case at least, is rather appropriate when you think about it), where Nigel had made a discovery:

"Spike Parsons always advises you too carry out a pornography search of your hotel room so I did, and I turned up some good stuff." Spike's theory is that hotel guests conceal porn around hotel rooms where it won't be found by cleaning staff, and leave it there. Nor, it seems, is porn all guests leave in hotel rooms. According to the 1993 Automobile Association Guide, pornographic magazines are the fifth most frequently discarded item while 47 of the 2000 British hotels canvassed reported abandoned vibrators and 'sex aids', 15 had found blow-up dolls, 7 had found whips, 10 some items of bondage paraphernalia, one a leather cat-o-nine-tails, and another a large quantity of exotic American condoms. You have to wonder what sort of dozy idiot would leave such stuff behind. Our subsequent search of our room turned up none of these items, alas, nor any porn.

"And me a member of Feminists Against Censorship, too!" complained Avedon, years of fighting to make the world safe for pornography giving her no advantage.

The next morning, feeling a little fragile after the alcoholic excesses of the previous night, I breakfasted with Pete and Eileen Weston. Faced with the greasiness of my bacon and the cheery sizzling of my egg, I feared that my stomach needed very little to tip it over the edge.

"Did you know," said Eileen Weston, "that, back in the sixties, Roger Peyton almost got to dance naked around a fire?". Oblivious to the way my hand suddenly flew to my mouth, she went on to explain that Rog had tried to chat up a Satanist and that, being a non-believer like most other fans, he'd only really been interested in getting her naked.

And did *you* know that a fan, Gerry Webb, was once among those short-listed to be Britain's first astronaut? No kidding. Also, and I assure you I'm not making this up, his was the name that popped up when, shortly before the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer, a tabloid newspaper fed Di's details into the computer of a dating agency. Nor is that all. According to Eileen, and I swear I'm still not making this up, Gerry, a fannish contemporary of the Westons, had recently been paid a four-figure stud fee to father a child. He brought both mother and child along with him to the 1992 Eastercon.

"Let me buy you a drink, Rob," said Pete Weston, at the end of breakfast. This had been his catchphrase since I published my MEXICON 4 report in *Licks 3* (FAPA 216, Aug '91), and as catchphrases go I felt it had much to commend it. In fact, I think it might have even wider application as a rallying cry, a common creed that could bind together the disparate elements of current day fandom and perhaps even usher in a new golden age of fannish peace and harmony. It is, as I'm sure you'll all agree, well worth trying.

When Pete brought me my beer we got to chatting about the world in general and almost immediately he launched into a blistering attack on John Major's government and on how they were running the country. Or rather, as recent events had shown, how they weren't. I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Could this be the same man who back in the 1960s, when the rest of his generation was growing its hair and joining the protest against the war in Vietnam, had kept his hair resolutely short and joined the Young Conservatives in Quinton? Apparently it could, because that same Pete Weston who had organised hotel patrols to weed out marijuana users at conventions in the early 1970s now revealed that he and Eileen had recently joined the Rotary Club, whose activities, contrary to popular belief, consisted of a never-ending round of wife-swapping parties, S&M sessions, and cannibalism. (Okay, so I made up that bit about the wife-swapping and the S&M, but it was still a shock to hear Pete admit that he now finds Rotary Club meetings more enjoyable than those of the Birmingham SF Group.)

The Leeds Group were out in force at NOVACON, notable exceptions being D West, and Nigel Richardson & Michael Ashley - the latter pair having succumbed to the miserabilism that comes with listening to too many records by The Smiths. I got into conversation about comics with Simon Polley, who expressed his liking for Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* comic and his particular fascination with its regular characters, 'the Endless':

"You know," he said, "Despair, Delight, Desire, Destruction, D. West...."

Black leather was the dominant mode of dress among those Leeds Group members who were at the con, and they looked like a gang of bikers who had mislaid their Harley-Davidsons. Nor were they the only ones at the con determined to make a sartorial statement....

For Bill Clinton, 'Slick Willie' is a nickname; for Martin Smith, a condition to be achieved. To this end he ventured out into the concrete wilderness of central Birmingham to seek out some wicked duds that would focus his sex-appeal to a laser-like intensity. And, indeed, he *did* look pretty sharp in the nearly two hundred pounds-worth of spanking new threads he returned with, a sharpness sadly undercut by his insistence on wearing thirty pence-worth of old sneakers with them. Martin was making a statement, and that statement was: I am an idiot.

It's no great secret that I love dancing so, naturally enough, I popped into the disco a couple of times on Saturday night to see if anything was happening. Unfortunately, each time I did so all I saw was a circle of male heavy metal fans thrashing away at air guitars and furiously shaking their heads in a spirited attempt to dislodge those last few pesky brain cells. So, alas, I didn't get to dance at NOVACON and had to console myself by drinking lots of beer with John Harvey, Martin and Nigel. Sometimes, life is hell.

And so the convention sank slowly into the sunset. Or, at least, into a pleasant haze of enjoyable schmoozing in which memory dissolves and from which little can be recalled. There are some things we can be certain of, however: drink was drunk, banter was bantered, and Martin Smith was mocked. This I know because this was, after all, just another Novacon. And we'll do it all again next year.

9. | THE PRECURSOR INTERSECTION

In keeping with the eco-friendly principles we all strive to live by, this convention report contains at least 30% recycled material by weight, said material being my programme notes....

**** Welcome to PRECURSOR, the convention for those who can't afford INTERSECTION and those rich sods who can afford both. This all-expenses spared leaflet is the programme and should be read immediately as it includes all manner of information vital to your enjoyment of the convention, spiritual health, and regular bowel movements. Should you have any queries the committee will be glad to help you with them. We are, of course, Rob Hansen, John & Eve Harvey, and Martin Smith, though just for a laugh we'll be wearing badges identifying us as Joseph Nicholas, Dan & Lynn Steffan, and Martin Smith. We'll be delighted to answer all your questions in detail and at length.****

Friday 18th August 1995 did not begin well for me. The previous evening Martin had phoned to say he was ill and wouldn't be at our regular Thursday night pub meeting. He thought he had flu and said he might not make PRECURSOR either. This would be an enormous tragedy for the con because he was bringing along the equipment for Sunday's softball game. While frantically trying to contact Jim Young to get him to bring his softball gear along, I decided to check the days e-mail...and discovered that Avedon had offered Tom Whitmore crash space here at Gross Manor when he flew in from California tomorrow. Arrgh! Leaving Avedon to send an urgent e-mail message to Tom while praying he hadn't set off for the airport yet, I drove over to Welling to pick up Vince Clarke, hoping against hope this wasn't all a taste of things to come. I needn't have worried. After driving Vince, Avedon, and our houseguest, Neil Rest, up to Stevenage and the Hertfordpark Hotel, venue for PRECURSOR, we settled in for what was to be a pretty good little convention.

Chuch and Sue Harris were already at the hotel when we got there around 2.00pm, as was Peter Hentges, and we were soon joined by Andy Hooper, Carrie Root, Geri Sullivan, Dan and Lynn Steffan, Ted and Lynda White, Mike Abbott, Anne Wilson, Vicki Rosenzweig (who'd also been at last night's Fanhattonite meeting in London), Anne Wilson, Bridget Hardcastle, Jack Heneghan, my fellow concom members John and Eve Harvey and, most amazingly of all, Peter Roberts who was attending his first con in more than a decade.

"Peter's in advertising," I explained to John, "which means that someone like the head of the Chocolate Marketing Board will come up to him and say: 'Quick, we need a slogan that will make people buy more chocolate!' 'Eat Chocolate, It's Yummy!' replies Peter. 'Great' says the man from the Chocolate Marketing Board, 'here's two hundred thousand pounds'."

"Actually," laughed Peter, "I quit advertising years ago. I'm a taxonomic mycologist now."

"Good for you!" I enthused, trying to sound like someone with a clue as to what a taxonomic mycologist might be.

Dan and Lynn had traveled here following a lightning visit to Haverfordwest.

"When we were staying with Greg Pickersgill we got to learn what your middle name was, and boy did he use it a lot!" laughed Dan. "So what *were* your parents thinking of when they named you Rob Fucking Hansen?"

Martin showed up mid-evening, when things were in full flow and a lot of great conversation and drinking was going on in the bar, looking and sounding half-dead. The Harveys and I ordered him to bed, and he went, but he was back in the bar an hour or two later; the call of the alcohol was far stronger than his need for rest.

**** The programme starts at 1.00pm on Saturday since any programming on Friday would only interfere with the serious business of getting acquainted with each other and with the bar. This is a social relaxacon, after all. There is no programming before 1pm on Saturday itself since this would only interfere with the serious business of recovering from the serious business of getting acquainted with each other and with the bar the night before. As for the running order:

FANZINE READINGS (Starts 1.00pm-ish)

Yes, this is actually what it sounds like but, having seen how well these work at US cons we've decided to try one at PRECURSOR. We're sure you'll enjoy it. No, really.****

The last time I'd seen Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden was at the New York CORFLU in 1990, but having reestablished contact via the miracle of e-mail I'd talked them into being on this item. With 1.00pm fast approaching and P&T having yet to arrive at the hotel (they were flying in today) I began getting antsy. Martin had been going to read "**Mexicon 4, Martin Smith 0**" (which I'm told was reprinted in a fanthology published for the Vegas CORFLU) but wasn't up to it, so I'd replaced him with Andy Hooper, and the last thing I needed was to have to find other stand-ins. Patrick appeared with minutes to spare, sporting a goatee that gave him the appearance of an early-60s jazzman (daddio!), and quickly trawled through the zines I'd brought along, settling on a piece from D West's monumental **FANZINES IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE**, a seminal collection of fanwriting. There was no Teresa, however. She was in their room, engaged in a titanic life-and-death struggle with a hairbrush. Seriously. Though apparently of previous good character, it had cunningly been biding its time and had chosen this moment to viciously attack her, getting irretrievably entangled with her hair. She would ultimately be saved from a scalping only by the arrival of the sixth cavalry in the form of Avedon and Patrick who, as soon as the readings were over, dashed upstairs and wrested his wife from the clutches of the villainous grooming aid.

****HAVE WE GOT FANDOM FOR YOU (Starts around 2.00pm)

Loosely (*very* loosely) based on the TV quiz show 'Have I Got News For You', this will pit teams of fans against each other in an allegedly topical contest. Angus Deayton, quizmaster of the TV show, is often referred to as 'Television's Mr.Sex' so we naturally chose as our quizmaster his fannish equivalent, Rob Hansen (Brian Burgess was unavailable). Correct answers will be awarded two points each while answers which are wrong but sufficiently witty or amusing may also be awarded a point at the discretion of the quizmaster, whose decision in these matters shall be final. Those contestants hoping to predispose the quizmaster toward favourable decisions on their behalf are advised to ply him with drinks in the bar beforehand. This won't in any way influence him, but they're advised to do it anyway.

No actual prizes will be awarded, but the winners will have the satisfaction and almost spiritual sense of fulfilment that comes from knowing they've ground their opponents into the dust.****

The two teams were the Cosmic Circle (Teresa Nielsen Hayden, Dan Steffan, and Joseph Nicholas) and the Muncie Mutants (Patrick, Andy Hooper, and Peter Roberts), the first round being a session of charades. For the benefit of the audience, the titles to be mimed were written on a large pad that was carried among them by my lovely assistant, Martin Smith. Patrick was the 'designated hitter' for the Mutants and, though it caused an eruption of laughter from the audience, for some reason he paled visibly on learning he had to mime 'Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan'. Alas, Patrick pointedly ignored calls from the audience to perform the obvious motion, his dithering causing Andy Hooper to say, very calmly: "Patrick, if you don't start giving us something to work with I am going to hurt you." Still, Andy got the answer eventually, Patrick managing to get the word 'fuck' across and there being only two well-known SF stories with that word in their titles.

We put a lot of work into the visual aids for this quiz, John doing the actual photographic work, and I was particularly pleased with the way the 'Odd One Out' round worked. Briefly, pictures of the four people you had to choose from were projected, one at a time, until all four were up on the screen. The foursomes were chosen (with the weirdest/silliest pictures of each person that we could find) so that they were amusing in themselves, and in the order in which we projected the pictures, as well as (we hoped) having amusing answers. And it worked! For instance do you know who is the odd one out among Ted White, Bill Clinton, Dan Steffan, and Newt Gingrich? (Clinton, of course, all the others inhaled.) Or among Larry Niven, Ronald Reagan, Jerry Pournelle, and Darth Vader? (Darth Vader, but *not* because he's the only liberal. Oddly enough, he was the only one not connected with America's 'Star Wars' programme.) Or among Joe Nicholas, Joe Stalin, Joe Siclari, and the artist formerly known as Rover - sorry, Prince. (Joe Siclari, because all the others have changed their name - Joseph Nicholas used to be Nick Turner. This is true.) Or, finally, among Paul Skelton, Ken Cheslin, Roz Kaveney, or WWII fighter ace Douglas Bader? (It's transsexual Roz Kaveney, because while all four have lost body parts she was the only one to do so voluntarily. Roz was in the audience, and laughed as loudly at this answer as anyone.)

****QUESTION TIME (Commencing about, oh let's see, 3.30pm or so)

Will the Internet destroy Fandom As We Know It? How can we attract more people to fandom? Why is Martin Smith? Fannish cons usually have an item where the burning fannish issues of the day are debated, and PRECURSOR will be no exception, though ours takes a somewhat different form than usual. Joseph Nicholas will be moderating a panel of opinionated fans (*okay, particularly opinionated fans*), much as the trainer 'moderates' the lions in a circus show, who will each train their cosmic minds on questions from the audience. Lively debate and audience participation will doubtless ensue and Joseph will attempt to maintain order. Good luck, pal.

With this deluxe Programme Leaflet, you will have received an expensively crafted file card, personally hand-tooled by the equally hand-tooled Martin Smith (sorry -- reflex action). If you have a question you'd like to have the panel debate, please

write it and your name on the card and return it to us, preferably no later than a half-hour before this item. Questions should be as wittily phrased as possible and can be either serious or frivolous (if you want them to debate the iconic significance of Martin's pyjamas we'll certainly consider it).****

We'd talked Joseph into being the moderator during a party for GUFF winners Ian and Karen Pender Gunn at his and Judith's house the previous Saturday. Predictably, Joseph drank too much and fell asleep in a chair, leading to an immediate call for felt-tip pens. Ever protective of him, Judith refused to let us scrawl the usual tasteful and understated graffiti on her comatose spouse, so instead I put a bucket at his feet and a card in his lap that read: I DIED IN THE WAR FOR PEOPLE LIKE YOU. PLEASE GIVE GENEROUSLY. And they did. The sound of coins landing in the bucket, all of which were later donated to GUFF, was matched only by the flashing of a multitude of cameras....

((I was to shamelessly recycle this same gag in 1998 at CORFLU UK when I placed this same sign on the unconscious form of a drunken fan in the hotel bar who shall remain anonymous in order to protect Martin Smith.))

On the panel with Joseph were Pam Wells, Ted White, and Chris Croughton. Not surprisingly, the topic that generated the most interest was next weekend's INTERSECTION and whether or not Worldcons in general were a good or bad thing for British fandom. No firm conclusions were reached. Sadly, the panel failed to debate my own, eminently sensible question (and here I paraphrase from memory):

"Does the team think the increasing visibility of SM and fetishism at US cons, as characterised most recently by the fascinating (I'm told) alt.sex.bondage parties at DISCLAVE, represents any threat to traditional fandom, or do they agree that the general ambiance of British cons would be greatly improved by having more young people parading around in leather and chains?"

****THE TALK SHOW (9.30pm sound good to you? Sounds good to me, too....)

Do you miss Johnny Carson? Do you pine for Jonathan Woss? Then your prayers may have been answered. With the charisma of John Major and the interviewing skills of Marcel Marceau, Martin Smith will be talking to high-profile celebrities from the glitzy and glamorous world of international fandom. This is *the* item to attend for an insight into the wit, the wonder, and the bizarre sexual practices that have made fandom what it is today.****

With Martin's voice now a whispered croak, that gag about Marcel Marceau was taking on unintended significance so, by mutual consent, the chat show was canceled. Everyone was having such a good time in the bar anyway that it would've been a shame to disrupt them. Martin's intended interviewees had been Pam Wells, Dan Steffan, and Andy Hooper, who'd all found other distractions....

"The British have smaller balls than we do," declared Andy, in an outrageous ethnic slur, "and smaller holes, too." He did not approve of British pool tables. Mean and moody, Andy took a singular approach to the game, apparently not realising it was only the balls on the table he was supposed to go for. Or so we assume. I was the first person the white ball narrowly missed; Dan Steffan was the second. Thereafter, the faint-hearted dived for cover whenever Andy took to the table, while those male fans with the necessary sang froid casually slid a hand over our testicles.

The final official programme item of the evening was a cheese and punch party to celebrate Bridgit Hardcastle's birthday. Good food and punch, too, but the infernal heat we were cursed with all weekend finally drove most of us back to the cooler confines of the pool room.

****This item concludes Saturday's official programme. Thereafter you are encouraged to drink, talk, make merry, and to enjoy any sexual assignments you may have been fortunate enough to make, because on Sunday there awaits:

THE MARTIN SMITH SOFTBALL CHALLENGE (noonish)
No, this will not involve tests of testicular rigidity. Softball is actually a (gasp!) sport, not unlike rounders. At the insistence of Martin Smith, who has all the equipment and is dying to use it (no jokes, please), typically unfit UK fans will be playing with or against typically unfit US fans in a battle of wits, wills, and waistlines. Immensely popular at the American CORFLU, these games are legendary among fans and paramedics across the US. Anyone wishing to participate should contact

Martin as soon as possible rather than waiting for the tacky and rather unseemly draft that may follow.****

To my great surprise, I was the first to be picked for his team by captain Jack Heneghan who obviously thought my height and my still just discernable waistline indicated ball-paying potential. Boy, was he in for a shock! On the Other Side were Martin, Jim Young, Christina Lake, Carrie Root, Joseph Nicholas, Keith Oborn, and Mike Scott, all ably captained by Andy Hooper, while our side consisted of me, John Harvey, Lynn Steffan, Peter Hentges, Peter Roberts, Tom Whitmore (who'd got our e-mail message after all and decided that PRECURSOR sounded pretty nifty), and Mike Ford, under the sterling captaincy of our leader, Smoking Jack Heneghan. (Literally smoking. I'm not that familiar with the game, but surely it's not usual for the guy at bat to be puffing away on a Marlboro?) Dan Steffan was the umpire.

There were two injuries in the game, both of which were sustained by Jim Young. The first of these occurred when Jim made a diving attempt to tag Mike Ford as Mike leapt for first base. This left Mike hopping around and Jim lying on his back, clutching his forehead. (Later, Jim confided in me that the game had been the most fun he'd had all summer, and definitely more fun than the US tour promoting his new SF novel, **ARMED MEMORY**. "So, you're saying a book tour is less fun than being kicked in the head?" "You've got it.")

I'd never played softball before, yet I managed a feat that no-one else on the field was able to equal. Despite many energetic, if spastic, flailings in its general direction, I completely failed to make contact with the ball all afternoon! Realising I was more likely to spontaneously combust than hit the ball I decided to try for a 'walk'. I became stiffer than a board, or a statue, or even Al Gore, only to have Andy respond with perfectly pitched balls and strike me out. Undaunted, I went on to make Martin's con for him by being both the outfielder who let by the ball that gave him the winning home run of the game, and the guy whose strike-out finished off the other team. Being the sort of salt-of-the-earth fannish types who have made fandom what it is today, those of you reading this are surely ready to offer commiseration's such as "Bad luck, Rob", " It could've happened to anyone", and "You're fucking useless". These are appreciated, but unnecessary. Though I perhaps should have been, I was not down-hearted as we headed back to the hotel for drinks and CPR. Seeing the glow on Martin's face, the beatific expression that was all that any dictionary needed to run a picture of next to the word 'smug', I knew that I had Done A Good Thing. On some deep level I had realised how important this afternoon was to my friend and, with his mental and physical well-being ever uppermost in my thoughts, had subconsciously done what was necessary to make him the outstanding player of the game. I smiled, knowing this was the only logical explanation. After all, no-one could be *that* godawful at softball, could they?

There were a few more hours of pool and conversation as people began drifting away, and then it was over. It had been a great convention with final attendance being just under fifty, an ideal size. Most of the American fans (who made up about half the membership of PRECURSOR) were heading on for the Worldcon, but we'd be seeing many of them again in London in the weeks to come.

As an interesting footnote, when I attended my first con I was 20 years 4 months old. In August 1995, I was 40 years 8 months old. So at PRECURSOR I celebrated having spent half my life in fandom. Half a lifetime? That's not too many....

10. | CEASE AND DESIST

"Rob, why do you pick on poor defenceless Martin Smith like you do?", and "How come Martin is always the butt of all your jokes?", not to mention: "Has Martin thrown up over your furniture again yet?"

These are just some of the questions that outraged readers haven't asked me. And it's both peculiar and disturbing that they haven't asked these questions. Or so Martin insists. Myself, I'm not at all surprised. The bright and perceptive people who read these pieces, subjecting them to an intelligent and probing search for fart jokes, understand that the apparent abuse he suffers in them is in fact a vital and necessary part of his fannish education. They also think it's pretty funny. Nevertheless, I would answer their legitimate concerns about Martin thus: no, he hasn't thrown up over our furniture again yet, despite Avedon and I being ever so amused the last time he did.

So, the apparent abuse heaped on Martin in these pieces is in fact just a way of preparing him for, and making him better able to cope with, the slings and arrows of outrageous fannish criticism. It's also had the effect of raising his fannish profile and helping him get laid. By lesbians. Yes, incredible as it seems, Martin has achieved the remarkable feat of being seduced by not one but *two* women who'd previously been exclusively lesbian for years, a feat perhaps foreshadowed by his childhood love for the story of the little Dutch boy and one only slightly diminished by the fact that both then immediately returned to being exclusively lesbian.

Given my selfless efforts on his behalf, you can imagine my surprise when Martin wrote to Andy Hooper complaining of the way I was treating him and offering Andy all future literary rights, as if I was responsible for his recent inability to get laid. When I read of this in Andy's *Spent Brass*, I promptly contacted my lawyers, who acted immediately:

Andrew Hooper Esq.,
4228 Francis Ave. N. #103
Seattle
WA 98103
USA

5 December 93

Dear Sir,

It has been brought to our attention by our client, Mr ROBERT HANSEN (hereinafter referred to as the CLIENT), that in the twentieth issue of the periodical *Spent Brass*, edited by yourself and dated 4th August 1993 (though received lamentably late by our client on 29th November 1993, along with the two subsequent issues of said periodical), you announced that one MARTIN SMITH, the Disputee With Entertainingly Emetic Behaviour (hereinafter referred to as the DWEEB, for short) was seeking to sever all contractual ties with the CLIENT in order to assign these to yourself. In accordance with the instructions of the CLIENT, we do hereby affirm his continued contractual rights in this matter and do order you to cease and desist from any use of the DWEEB you may have planned. In order for your own legal department to confirm the primacy of our claim we are enclosing a copy of the contract between the CLIENT and the DWEEB, duly signed and witnessed. At the time the signing took place the DWEEB, swaying alarmingly and loudly declaring that he "don' need no steenkin' pen", insisted on signing the contract in the manner shown. Should you doubt the validity of this signature, we refer you to the second way in which the DWEEB has signed this contract, to wit: the stains at the bottom. DNA matching with the original in our possession will show that this was made by his very own vomit.

Yours Sincerely,
Ezekiel Lockstock BMOC, FWUK.

Below is a copy of the legally-binding contract:

I, MARTIN RALPH SMITH, being of sound mind and body, if not liver, and having just consumed the thirteen pints of beer, four miniatures of whiskey, three glasses of Pernod, and two packets of Salter's Dry Roasted Peanuts that comprise my fee, do hereby assign all rights to myself for the purposes of satire, ribaldry, piss-take, and character assassination to the contractee, ROBERT HANSEN, in perpetuity. In order to provide a steady supply of raw material for this purpose, I also undertake to behave like a complete cretin while under the influence of alcohol at parties and conventions and to spectacularly fail to get laid in tragic yet highly amusing fashion. I do furthermore assign non-exclusive rights of sexual access to all my bodily orifices to the contractee in the unlikely event that he may wish to make use of them (no one else seems to want to). I acknowledge how fortunate I am to appear in the contractee's Hugo -- nay, *Pulitzer* -- quality writing and agree to buy him several pints of beer whenever we're at the same gathering. Have a nice day.

((smudged fingerprint here on original))

Martin R. Smith Robert Hansen
Avedon Carol
Witness. 10 January 1991

((disgusting stain here on original))

Andy must have been intimidated by my high powered legal team because I've never seen another *Spent Brass*. However, that it was still being published was confirmed when the following letter to Andy was copied to me:

Ref: MQS/mts 14 May 1994

Mr Andrew P. Hooper
4228 Francis Ave. N. #103.
Seattle
WA 98103
USA

Dear Sir,

I am writing on behalf of the British Union of Martin Smiths (BUMS) to protest the depiction of member Martin Ralph Smith in the most recent issue of your publication, *Spent Brass*. Specifically, we are deeply disturbed by your stereotypical depiction of a Martin Smith failing miserably to get laid, which we found both inappropriate and insensitive. Such a Smithist representation is particularly unfortunate at a time when so many university campuses on both sides of the Atlantic have voluntarily adopted speech codes forbidding mockery of Martin Smiths as part of a larger commitment to anti-Smithism.

BUMS was founded in 1979 when the increasing use of characters called Martin Smith as figures of fun in popular entertainment (such as Douglas Adams' *'Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy'*), coupled with the realisation that there were enough of us to constitute a sizeable minority group, one with legitimate grievances that needed to be addressed, led to calls for action.

Martin Ralph Smith took to BUMS immediately, and was delighted when BUMS opened up for him. We are tireless in our efforts to get members into BUMS, and he has stated that coming into BUMS changed his life. It was to aid such sad individuals that BUMS was created, and we hope that in future *Spent Brass* will demonstrate sensitivity and awareness of our concerns.

Yours Faithfully,

Martin Q. Smith
Director
Anti-Defamation Section
British Union of Martin Smiths

cc. Robert Hansen Esq.

Deeply impressed by the arguments of BUMS, and even more deeply impressed by Martin's revelation that they expect an action against *Spent Brass* would net enough for him to buy a car, I have decided to stop writing pieces that mock him. It's weird to imagine Martin owning a car, though. They say that a man's car is an extension of his penis, and this may well be true, but, in line with my new policy, I wouldn't of dream of suggesting that if Martin had a car he'd spend all his time polishing it. Those days are behind me now, and I hope Martin finds all the enjoyment in BUMS that he can. No, in future I'll confine myself to nostalgic memories of him crying "You bastard!" and, both in the interest of the fanhistorical record and as a final service to him, publish a collected edition of **THE MARTIN CHRONICLES**.

It's the least I can do.

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