

They Made Us Do It

A genzine by Max

Autumn 2002

Did that title change?

Yes, the title changed.

The previous issue of this fanzine was called *They Made Me Do It* and it was a perzine. It wasn't sure if it was going to be a one of or the first of many and it was very nearly given the title *Wider Audience*. I wish I had now, because then it wouldn't have been appropriate to change the title when I decided to do this second issue. This time it's not just me.

Claire was a little perturbed when I pounced on Simon's piece just before she claimed it for *Banana Wings*; she pointed out I've got myself a genzine. Simon and Ang were both vaguely surprised that I wanted to republish what they'd written. Doug simply suggested that people might want to share his piece where they could. I don't need to say anything more about it all, the point is the writing speaks for itself.

I see the point now. Some work really is crying out to be committed to paper, no matter how happy it is sitting there on the internet. This zine grew legs, but it's definitely still the same fanzine. I think there will be more. I might even relent on the artwork and LoC Column stance. They're not here this time but next time, who knows?

Contents

Watching Falling Stars.....	3
Gathering rain	5
July 4th, Kenwood Beach.....	6
Life Without Anne	9

Watching Falling Stars

By Simon Bradshaw

The dust particle has orbited the Sun for thousands of years, shed millennia ago from the miles-wide chunk of dirty ice that is the nucleus of Comet Swift-Tuttle. Since then it has followed its parent comet's orbit dozens of times, lingering for decades in the outer reaches of the solar system in between its century-spaced plunges through the realm of the inner planets. Today, it once more makes its closest approach to the sun, an approach that takes it across the orbit of Earth.

Today, Earth happens to be there.

Nine o'clock, and heading back from the Cambridge pub meeting. I'm still a little worn out from ConteXXt, and an early bed looks like a welcome idea. But the sky is strikingly clear, sunset colours shading into inky blue-black, with a brilliant crescent Moon setting low in the west. It will be clear skies for the night of August 12th, which means that despite the weather of the last few days there might be a chance of seeing the Persied meteor shower after all.

The particle fell past the Moon's orbit a little while ago. Now the Earth - a blue-white crescent from the direction of its approach - is swelling against the stars.

After a quick email check, I go out the back to check up on the sky. Clear and cloudless, with the stars sharp and bright in the way they often are after rain has washed the dirt out of the atmosphere. I do not have to wait for long before a sudden bright streak is etched across the sky - it is Perseid maximum tonight, and on average there will be a naked-eye meteor every minute or two.

Unfortunately, the view from our back garden is hemmed in by trees, restricted to a patch overhead. If I'm to stand much chance of seeing more of the display, I'll need somewhere with a better view. I grab my fleece, thermal-lined woolly hat (you learn some things early on as a stargazer, especially one with thinning hair), my 7x50 binoculars and a folding lawn chair, and drive off for my local observing site.

The Earth is close now, only a few tens of thousands of kilometres away. Perhaps the dust particle has been this close before, but this time there is no doubt; this time, it will not miss.

Not long after moving to Huntingdon last year, I started scouting out good stargazing sites. I wanted somewhere away from streetlights, relatively secluded (so as not to be the likely haunt of the local mischief) but easy to get to. Brampton Wood proved ideal, only two kilometres away on the map (although rather further to drive), it is a small nature reserve that despite lying less than a mile off the A1 is only accessible via a single-track

road that links the back ends of two small villages. I park in the tiny gravel car park at the edge of the wood, carry my seat through the access gate and walk fifty metres up a path to a moderately-sized clearing. By day, this is the arrival point for visitors to the wood, complete with a small shelter holding information posters detailing the wood's wildlife. Now, it is a sheltered observing ground providing an excellent view of the night sky.

I set down my chair facing south. This is away from the shower radiant, but this gives perhaps the best chance of seeing meteors, as I will be looking at them as they pass me, rather than head-on. As my eyes adapt to the darkness, the patterns of the constellations fade into the broader sprinkle of stars, the milky way cutting a faintly luminous swathe across the sky. Small dots of light drift past: satellites. I've checked the predictions website before coming out, and seen that tonight's appearances are mainly the upper stages of Russian satellites. Each of those dots is a tumbling cylinder of aluminium and titanium, blasted into space from Tyuratam or Plesetsk to do its job for a few brief minutes before following its payload into orbit. One day it will fall to earth like the meteors I am here to watch, but for now each one skims smoothly on to disappear behind the trees.

And the meteors themselves. Every minute or two another sharp streak flicks across the sky. They arrive at random; for minutes at a time there will be nothing, and then two or even three meteors will follow in quick succession.

The particle is very close now. The world ahead of it is fast unfolding into a landscape under it. Sparkles and flashes ahead of it show where its fellows are meeting their brief but spectacular ends.

Now and again I take a break from meteor-watching and raise the binoculars to my eyes. Sometimes I look for a particular target - the Andromeda galaxy is an easy find, a hands-breadth below the crooked 'W' of Cassiopeia - and sometimes I just slowly sweep through the star-clouds of Cygnus, marvelling at the endless scattering of stars. The woods are surprisingly noisy, with the odd crack of twigs and muffled sounds of movement adding to the chorus of crickets and reminding me that there is other life than just me out here tonight. Rabbits mainly, but there are a few deer around as well.

It is past midnight now, and tempting as it is to stay I am back at work tomorrow. Besides, clumps of cloud are now rolling in. I take one last look up at the sky.

The dust particle slams into the upper atmosphere. The wisps of air are a minuscule fraction of the density at sea level, but to a mote of dust travelling at tens of kilometres per second they are barrier enough. In milliseconds the particle is transformed to a ball of superheated plasma, shedding its kinetic energy as a flash of light visible over a broad stretch of East Anglia, a hundred kilometres below.

A final, and particularly bright, Perseid etches a luminous trail across Draco and Cygnus. Enough for tonight. I pick up my chair and head back for the car, and home.

Gathering rain

By Ang Rosin

The fluffy white clouds that I woke up with this morning have gone. They have been replaced by a flat bank of grey wool - it's almost like a giant toddler has gathered all the clouds together and rolled them out for pastry. A slight purple tinge seems to promise rain - maybe not right now but soon. The trees outside are moving in time with a welcome breeze that is releasing some of the pressure of the heat and I find myself already missing the sun.

I've been bemused by talk of cold baths, electric fans and begging for rain. I enjoyed the sunshine this weekend and the gift it gave of leisure. Conversation at work focused on what people did at the weekend. No-one was expected to say that they came to work and, of course, no-one did. People tended to their gardens, walked out along the coast, visited relations or made lazy attempts at shopping. I started and finished a Babylon 5 novel, painted a door and had a competition with my nephew over who could blow the most bubbles. I met friends, watched films and listened to concerts but with none of my normal rush and bother. I sat in a circus tent at 10 pm in only a small denim dress and cursed the lady sat behind who couldn't survive without the aid of an hand-held electric fan. She seemed oblivious to the noise as she created her own private and pointless breeze.

Today, of course, it wasn't as pleasant while I was inside working - dreaming of ice-cream, and reading books in the sun. The members of the lab had just melted away and I was alone in the heat for most of the day. I didn't achieve much until a lot later on, actually staying late after enjoying the onset of industry. At one point an impromptu water fight broke out outside the window between two youngish lads each armed with a bottle of water. The normal contingent of sallow-eyed prostitutes had disappeared - I imagine the lethargic weather is bad for business. Even the traffic seemed slower, more calm (although I think that had more to do with the whores going AWOL than the weather calming tempers).

I will feel cheated if the storm breaks in the night. I've worked for it and I deserve to see it in all its glory, not curse it as I try to sleep through the drumming rain and rolling thunder. Worse than that. Maybe we won't have a storm at all? Maybe it will break out at sea, or in the hills, and miss completely the pancake-flats of Liverpool. We will watch the storm and floods that slash at the rest of the country and wonder what makes us so safe.

I last stood out in a thunderstorm when I was fifteen. I stood, within running distance of shelter and felt the rain pound through my clothes. Rachel and Chris shouted at me from the subway but still I stood outside, not really caring how wet I got. I remember laughing as I felt the pressure release, smelt the tin in the air and tasted the sand whipped up from the coast. I enjoyed the laugh that I got from my friends - my curly hair plastered around my face and water dripping from the cuffs of my coat. "You dickhead, c'mon let's get home."

My parents laughed less.

July 4th, Kenwood Beach

By Max

Halfway down a ladder in the dark. Above me stand fishermen I've just met, below me is water, dark and calm. Bobbing there, eyes glinting, is Jimmy. It's nearing midnight on the 4th July. We've eaten and listened to music and come to the end of the pier to see fireworks but they were let off before we came out. Jimmy wants us to jump off the end of the pier into the water but I'm far too sensible for that. Adrenaline rushes when I consider it. I could do it. I could jump. Excitement surges, but is met by an ultimate refusal.

"Jump!" he calls. But I don't. I make my way down slowly into the water, clutching at the ladder, feeling rough wood under my fingers, cold and slippery. My feet reach the water. I could let go and drop the rest of the way but the old self preservation kicks in and guides me carefully down, feet feeling for rungs below the surface until I'm submerged to my shoulders. I push myself away from the ladder, glide on my back into the dark pool that is the bay.

I'm wearing a swimsuit and my three quarter length trousers and a bandanna. Half clothed and floating. Perhaps I'm not so sensible after all. Jimmy darts up the ladder and plummets from the edge of the pier. His waves make me bob, my head turns away to avoid the spray. The water is warm, only slightly salty. Floating is no effort, I lie back and kick gently, propelling myself away from the pier end. Water drags through my clothes, I turn back towards the pier and pull off the trousers, climbing halfway back up the ladder to drop them beneath one of the benches. I look down. All thoughts of jumping the distance disappear, it's too far down, I don't know how deep the water is - daytime experience suggests it's quite shallow.

Jimmy's back up top now, urging Nic to take the plunge. He makes excuses about cigarettes and glasses but eventually removes the glasses, throws the glowing stub into the dark waters and climbs onto the edge from which he dives. The spray catches me again as I close my eyes and cringe, halfway down the ladder.

Treading water and swimming we circle one another for a while, the others repeatedly climbing out and jumping back in, each trying to maximise the splashback hitting everyone. Eventually Nic climbs back up to chat to the fishermen and Bobbie who casts us the odd disparaging look in our direction. Tonight the role of Grown Up is played by Bobbie Farey.

Floating again, gently swaying with the waves in the dim light from the single pole mounted lamp at the end of the pier I reach down to find the bed of the water. It's too far away, my height doesn't let me get close with my head above water. I propel myself slowly towards the beach, periodically checking for the bottom that stays out of reach.

"You crazy woman!" Jimmy calls. "There's sea nettles out there! You're gonna get lit up!"

I ignore him and keep going, still not reaching the floor. "I can't find the bottom!" I call back.

Across the quiet water, Jimmy's manic laugh comes. He delights in the accent. "I can't find the bo'om" he imitates. "It's right here," he tells me, standing at the side of the pier, arms high above the water. "It's not deep!"

I turn and head back towards the pier. There at the side where Jimmy had stood I try to reach the ground beneath the water and fail again. He's at the top of the pier, now, peering over the edge, just a big grinning bandanna-ed head. "It's right there! There's a sandbank," he tells me.

"You might not have noticed but I'm not exactly tall!" I tell him, frantically moving to my left, reaching, reaching for the floor that can't be found. A toe manages to make purchase in the sand. Standing on tiptoe, head craned backwards to leave my face above water, I pause. Floating was easier than standing is under these conditions.

Sssss! The water sizzles as a cigarette end lands less than a metre from my head. "Nic!" I yell.

"Sorry, I thought you were round the other side!"

Again, Jimmy jumps, catching me unexpecting this time. Water covers my face, I splutter and sniff, stepping back in the process and finding the shallow bit of water where the sand has collected. Now I can stand and walking further to the left brings my shoulders out from under the water.

"Come on," Jimmy urges. "You should jump!"

Shaking my head, I kick off and swim away, halfway down the pier back to the land. If I get there and climb out I'll have to have someone let me through the pier gate again. I pause, treading water. I should go back to the ladder. But first I want to savour this, fix the memory of floating. The voices are audible but the words are indistinct. There are no fish being caught, just lines hanging down into the deeper water leaving that side of the pier out of bounds. I wonder if we're disturbing the fish, frightening them away. Nobody complains, though. They're sitting smoking weed up there. Not many of the fishermen are left and really they're there to chill out, not to catch anything. Fish haven't been biting anyway, so they said. There's a barely noticeable breeze that brushes across the parts of me not submerged. The water laps quietly around the legs of the pier that stands tall above me. I am here, I am happy, I have nothing to worry about as I float and listen, eyes closed. Time passes, I can't tell how long, I don't care. Then it's time to go back and be sociable.

I swim slowly back to where I came from. The tide fights my progress but the pier end comes closer and closer. My arm is stung by a jellyfish that floats past. It hurts and yet it

fails to annoy me. "Fair enough," I think, "I'm invading its space." All the same I'm not keen to take more hits and I watch the water warily as I go back. I tell them I got stung as I return. They suggest vinegar. Jimmy expresses a complete lack of surprise, says the water's full of them out there, tells me I'm a crazy English woman again. I shrug. It wasn't a bad sting, it barely hurts, there's no mark.

I wring out the sopping wet trousers and pull them back on, still sodden. It's so warm that the cooling effect of wearing wet clothes is completely welcome. Only the bugs that consistently land on my arms and legs are unwelcome. Nic mutters about the disappointment of no fireworks. Jimmy balances carefully along the rail that circles the pier. When he misses his footing panic momentarily sweeps across his face - panic because he's not expecting it, not because falling would be bad, all that's below is the water he repeatedly throws himself into. He rights himself and lets out that small "huhuh" laugh, then jumps in again.

When he emerges we walk back to the house. Jimmy doesn't stay long. He goes back out, smokes some more with the one remaining fisherman and throws himself into the water again and again. The next day his leg displays a huge round welt, a bruise and a sore in one. "Big fucker got me," he told us. "Jellies are everywhere, Lit me up GOOD. That's what the big ones'll do to you."

And yet, later that day I'm back in the water. I never did jump off the pier.

Life Without Anne

By Douglas Spencer

Today marks a year without Anne. She died at lunchtime on the 5th of September 2001. It was about now (half-ten am) that we turned the machines off and started waiting.

The news is full of one-year-after-the-trade-centre. I bet that in 2006 it'll be full of five-years-after-the-trade-centre. It doesn't help.

I was going to say "*I hope no-one reading this loses their partner*", but that's stupid. These things happen.

Better: I hope that, if anyone reading this loses their partner, they find themselves helped by a team like mine.

The family, UK SF fandom, the British Computer Society, the people at work, the Church.

Some people reading this won't have met Anne.

I was going to write something new today which captured on the screen what she was like in real life.

I can't do that. I tried and it didn't work.

Dave Langford emailed me shortly after Anne died, and I sent him the following lines which he was kind enough to quote in *Ansible 171*. I still can't do better than this. Anne had other qualities, but her nature as described in the final line of this post informed everything she ever did.

There were four things that affected Anne's ability to do what she wanted to do.

She had angina, so her heart stopped her doing it.

She had emphysema, so her lungs stopped her doing it.

She had lymphoedema, so her legs stopped her doing it.

But then, she had bloody-mindedness, so she did it anyway.

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And finally:

**There are 10 kinds of people in the world.
Those who understand binary and those who don't.**