

TITS, SAUSAGES AND BALLET SHOES

The following is an account of two trips to the UK , the first late August/early September, and the second during October of 2007.

Thanks are due to many, but most especially to John and Eve Harvey for their continued friendship and hospitality; to Mark Plummer and Claire Brialey for rashly letting me stay in the fanzine library; to James Bacon for occasionally letting me get a word in; to Liam for keeping it real; the Brum lot, which for some reason seems to include the Lawsons, with a special mention to Tony (Bastard!) Berry and everlasting love to my brother Martin.

Anybody mentioned in this tale almost certainly helped me get through. Well, except for Heidi.

Thanks for the curries!

Nic Farey
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Tits, Sausages and Ballet Shoes is a Nic Farey joint from Seven Views of Jerusalem.

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The usual

Chapter One

Jeez, my ass hurts! (Though since I'm back in Jolly Old England, I should probably rephrase that into the rather more ingenuous: "I have an achy bum".) Lots of waiting round in the airport and parking in various seats of various levels of discomfort in various modes of transportation over the course of 28 hours do tend to make you feel like a terminal Nobby Stiles sufferer, that's fer sure.

Made welcome, needless to say, by John and Eve, whose beer and pantry, respectively, I am progressively decimating. Eve sez I still have a noticeable "twang". "Dunno what y'all are talkin' about", sez I. She also complains that after a mere hour or two in my company, she has started swearing again, though I remind her it's probably pretty futile to try and keep up. We reminisce about past Mexican committee meetings, an activity which of itself contains a measure of futility since they were a long time ago and we've all had rather a lot to drink since then. Nostalgia, as they say, isn't what it used to be.

John offers to drive me to Baldock in the afternoon so I can visit mum at the nursing home. I will be collected later at Hertford North station after training it back and forcibly dragged to the local pub for a bit of dinner - sounds like a plan. We generate some badly marked maps off Eve's computer and manage to find the place with only one doubleback, which isn't really bad at all. It seems that, after America, everything here is so *close*. I'm expecting a drive of, oh I don't know, 45 minutes or so, which turns out to be done

in 15. The place looks quite nice from the outside, and becomes perhaps the 50th place I have smoked a cigarette outside of since I landed that morning.

The front door is locked up to keep the poor old dears from wandering off, but I am buzzed in after attracting the attention of someone inside, who responds to my gentle inquiry by telling me "Vera is in the Rose Room, up in the lift and to your right". I see mum's name on a door as I tiptoe down the corridor, at the end of which I see some kind of common room, and a familiar head by the door, bobbing slightly to a tune only it can hear. Elvis Costello's *Veronica* is going through mine.

"Hello Mum", I say, kneeling down in front of the chair like a penitent and giving her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Who is it?", she asks, my first clue to the extent of the deterioration of her mind and eyesight. I whisper my name into her ear, and am rewarded by the fiercest hug an almost-86-year-old woman may be capable of producing. A tear tries briefly to escape from her right eye, but perhaps remembering the locked door thinks better of it and makes a slow but deliberate retreat. I chatter away, telling her how good she looks (actually as well as I might have expected), how I just got in that morning, stuff about work and how well I'm doing, getting another raise when I get back, despite the fact she always disliked the thought of me working in anything other than jacket and tie. "Lovely to see you", she says, over and over. "Lovely to see you!"

I hear our phone calls over the last few months, which have mostly been quite

brief, her saying “Lovely to hear from you. Lovely to hear from you!”, over and over.

The Rose Room, apparently the upstairs TV room, is ringed by very new easy chairs in a shade of green which I find difficult to see due to my colorblindness, so I try to tune it out and postpone the inevitable headache. The chairs are occupied by a number of old ladies in various states of decay and dementia, one or two of whom are quite personable and chatty with this previously unseen visitor. Those capable of reaction do seem rather pleased that I have finally made it across the pond to see Dear Old Mum.

“How are we going to get back?”, she says.

I take my leave after an hour, a goodbye replete with promises to be back in a day or two, after I’ve seen the cousins and the churchyard. “Lovely to see you!”, mum says.

I have a little chat with a very nice staff member, and we agree there isn’t too much going on above the neck, to put it crudely, although apart from the eyes and the wonky legs mum is physically in decent shape, and more or less looks it, apart from the fact that her dentures need a good clean and she has Mrs. Brady whiskers. She’s lost a little weight, but certainly isn’t as pale and frail as certain unsympathetic cousins would have led me to believe. I shall return soon.

A train and a couple of pints later, I am safely ensconced with John and Eve at a

pub table awaiting dinner, The Robin Hood & Little John now being the 94th place I have smoked a cigarette outside of. I’ve been eating rather well since I got off county food, though of course any improvement in diet would be a given. The Anne Arundel County jail food is particularly bad and has achieved almost statewide renown for this achievement. The menu is calculated to the last drop and detail to provide the absolute minimum of nutritional requirements, and for some reason this mandates a serving (=

about 2 tablespoons) of carrots included in almost every meal. So when the eagerly awaited chicken with cheese and bacon sauce and lyonnaise potatoes arrives with a generous side of carrots, I groan audibly: “Fuckin’ ‘ell!”.

Quizzical looks beg me to explain my unexpected reaction in a joint known for its well more than decent cuisine, so I do. “Fuckin’ ‘ell”, Eve agrees.



Chapter Two

It’s not too often you get the opportunity to describe a water heater as “vicious”, but in the case of John and Eve’s I really think no other adjective will do. A quarter turn of the hot tap will more than suffice, anything more carries a serious risk of scalded squidgy bits and similar depredations.

Went over to see cousin Harvey and his wife Jean on Wednesday, and in the course of this initially quite uncomfortable

encounter manage to learn that it is entirely possible to be an only child and a black sheep at the same time. Many, many years ago when I was living in the flat in Hitchin with the unlamented Wifey #1 the owners of the building decided it would be a good larf to hit up all the residents for a load of money, ostensibly for roof repairs. At that time we got a £10,000 loan, secured against mum's house, which at the time was free and clear with no liens on it. I vaguely recall that this was probably twice what we really needed, and I attribute the larger amount to wifely profligacy. Anyway, I'd been paying this loan off more or less faithfully over the years (although later would learn that, as usual, I'd been fucked over royally by the loan people and locked into a 25 year interest only hellpit), until I got laid off by CAS from the programming job, and spent 6 months out of work until I began my second career in construction. I hadn't told mum too much about any of this, not wanting to worry her with it, so the first she found out that something might be amiss was when a debt collector barged in her door and started sizing everything up for potential value. Cousin Harvey stumped up the dues, which even after all this time still amounted to £10,000, and mum apparently had a major snit over it all and changed her will.

Harvey tells me that I owe him *two* big favors, the first being the abovementioned payoff, the second being that he apparently persuaded mum to at least bequeath what he described as "a nice sum" (although he won't tell me what it is, and I know mum's idea of "a nice sum" might be twenty quid), but the house was no longer to be left to me. I knew there were a number of individual bequests, so mum told me, and something to my son, who hardly needs it since his grandfather

died last year with an estate of about \$5 million. Now of course, all this would be quite trivial if it weren't for the fact that the little old house sold for what to me is an astonishing amount: a tad under half a million pounds. BB, I deduce, is likely to be somewhat put out since she is expecting some kind of windfall and for me to regain power of attorney over the family loot, neither of which will now happen. The family remains unaware of my recent – er – changes of address, and this shall remain so.

After being treated to the talking-to, and don't we *all* enjoy being treated like we're twelve, the cousin visit actually becomes rather amicable as we sort through the photo albums which have been retrieved from mum's house. Jean (is "cousin-in-law" a real description) didn't manage to get to the house for a few weeks after it was put up for sale, by which time it appears some light fingers may have been at work, since mum's dressing table had apparently been pretty much cleaned out, so things like the engagement ring, watch, and, importantly to me, my father's WW2 medals, were all AWOL. Sighs all around. I resolve to be sanguine over the whole business, and despite my trepidations over what BB will say about it all, the evening is made extremely pleasant by an awesomely good tableload of curries at John and Eves and a couple of episodes of *Heroes*. I fall asleep vaguely wondering who gets the balance of mum's estate, if and when, but ultimately decide it's probably better to keep schtum. After all, such matters hopefully would not arise for many years.

Thursday dawns, and my body clock seems to have adjusted well enough, since I am up with the dawn, if not the "dawning_star". I find that James Bacon is trying to micromanage my stay just like he

does everything else, but since this will involve a Croydon curry and piss-up, I am not entirely displeased. I again risk the scalded scrotum (*great* name for a rock band, or indeed a pub) and, deposited by the amiable John at Hertford North station, decide that £37 for a weekly pass to Baldock won't be worth it, so I get my cheap day return after a side trip to Woolies to get a value-priced phone, and head back up to the nursing home.

Mum recognizes me immediately, which is excellent! The visit is a little curtailed, though, as she claims to want to sleep for a bit. She becomes visibly emotional (quite a rarity in our family), and I think that somewhere in the back of her mind she's fully aware of the situation and absolutely *hates* what has happened to her. "I'll be back soon mum", I tell her. "Lovely to see you", she says, with a catch in her voice and a tremble of the lip. Again I spend a few minutes with one of the very nice staff, ensuring that a whisker trim and a denture cleaning will ensue that evening.

Providence Court seems to be a very well-run and caring place. Cousin Harvey



insisted that I should talk to the people "behind the desk", but like any tradesman I know better. If you *really* want to know how the war is going, you ask someone on the front line, in this case the carers who deal with mum on a daily basis. It's obvious they think the world of her, and the joint itself is in ten times better nick than many top convention hotels it has been my displeasure to frequent. With the proceeds from the house sale gathering (some) interest, and mum's pensions, I am quite satisfied that her care is assured at the queenly cost of £560 a week.

I sneak off the train at Hitchin, and taxi over to Pirton to spend a quiet moment in the churchyard and clean birdshit off the family gravestones. A little talk with my father and a couple of cigarettes later, I am *en autobus* back to tool around Hitchin for a few hours. The new phone works as I advise John that I'll not be needing dinner.

Murphy's fish and chips is now in the hands of Orientals! The cod & chips (and buttered roll and cup of strong tea) is as good as it ever was though, so I suppose John Murphy's secret batter recipe went along with the sale of the joint. It was quite strange to see unfamiliar people frying up at the place where dad used to drive us on Friday nights for our six penn'orth of chips back in the early sixties. The incongruity of a Chinese Murphy's is offset by what is still the best fish & chips in the world, and by the happy notion that at least it isn't called "Wang Chung".

Visits to a few of the old locals (The George, The Cock, The Bricklayers Arms, The Victoria and The Nightingale, all with names blissfully unchanged) bring word of

my old friend Tony Russell, who is now apparently some kind of round-the-world yachtsman (!). I make plans to catch up with him tonight at the Victoria. I eventually entrain, detrain, and learn from the Hertford taxi driver that John and Eve have apparently neglected to correct my pronunciation of their home village of Tonwell ("Tunnel"!). Thus armed with useful information, I am returned to the Sign of the Scalded Scrotum.

Chapter Three

After having being warned ahead of time by John that all indoor smoking was now illegal, I had half expected the streets to be knee-deep in fag-ends, but the worst only seems to be ankle-deep in a few places, and yet the majority of the female youth appears to tod around in ballet shoes. When I observe a gothish lass wearing a fairly serious set of FM heels on one of my innumerable train journeys, I am so excited I have to busy myself with *The Times* and think about baseball scores for several minutes to restore equilibrium.

I'm trying to remember not to say "fags" for cigarettes too much, given the problematic linguistic crossover which will accompany my return to King George's Shores. The lads in jail (particularly one James Gantt, who now works with me occasionally) used to get a lot of larfs out of this while waiting to get back in to the Barstow Hilton after a day of work. "Sucking on a fag, Nic?" I, of course, took all this in good part and put on my best RP: "Yes, I must just suck on one last fag before we go in!" I recall a



wonderful interview with the late great Peter Cook, like me an habitual and dedicated smoker. In an appearance with Dudley Moore on Parky's late show, 'Appen asked him about a recent trip to the USA, and wondered whether he'd encountered any comments about his smoking. "Ah yes", Cook related, "One chap remarked: 'You do seem to smoke a lot, Mr. Cook'. 'Indeed', I replied, 'I'm never really happy unless I have a fag in my mouth'". Perfect pause for effect (and a drag) before he casually added "Of course, being America, they were happy to oblige."

Perusing *The Times* is a mildly depressing exercise in rediscovering what a bish Murdoch made of the whole thing, and leaves me wondering what it will all mean for the *Wall Street Journal* now that the reactionary old git has finally got his hands on it. Topless T-Bill traders, perhaps? Since it's hard not to notice that all the young dollies here seem determined to put as much tit out in the world as they can, this may in fact be a welcome development for an old pervert such as myself.

Friday's schedule involves a trip to Bill Cook's old tattoo joint, which is miraculously still *in situ*. "This place has always been a tattoo place, always will be a tattoo place", the current proprietor earnestly informs me. I currently have four tattoos, three of which can be readily seen, and one of which (right shoulder) is a cover-up done 17 years or so ago by the old master Bill Cook hisself – actually the last piece of ink I had done. The left shoulder carries the second-oldest piece, a basic heart & rose motif

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announcing NIC and LOUISE to anyone who cares to read. This was done more or less as a deliberate attempt to piss off Wifey #1, Louise being the party I was ensconced with after the debacle that was my first marriage. BB finally got around to asking me if I would get a cover-up for this, preferably a dragon of some kind since she's become interested in collecting them. The cost, however, despite being rather reasonable for the work involved, will be prohibitive, so it will have to wait until I get a windfall of some kind. Tattoo work in America is ridiculously expensive, so next trip perhaps, whenever that is. I will, however, return to the shop Monday since they have some very nice dragon knick-knacks (cheap!), and thus BB's gift is taken care of.



Friday evening finds me camped at the Victoria, having been assured that erstwhile round-the-world yachtsman Tony Russell will be at his accustomed spot. Getting there early, I settle in with a Guinness, a copy of *Viz* and *The Man Behind the Shades* (W H Smith, £7.99), a biography of the poker genius Stuey

Ungar, a cautionary tale indeed which I manage to read most of before the kindly barmaid informs me that Tony has fired in a text message to one of his mates that he's too knackered to come out! Judging that I am only half-full of Guinness at this point, I toddle out to a curry joint up the road and am well-pleased with the food, though less well-pleased when I get back to Hitchin station and find that I have, for possibly the 30th time this week, managed to miss a train by 5 minutes, and at this time of night there isn't one for an hour. Being a gracious guest, I call John to let him know I'll be back around midnight, which is no problem because they're up late anyway.

Saturday, and to visit mum again. Despite the fact that her mind is on an interesting journey to far-flung parts, she has retained her personality, which is largely a happy one, and therefore a happy thing. She's been complaining about her watch being missing (lost, stolen or strayed), so I will look for one for her when I go to Hitchin market later that day. I fill most of the visit with essentially aimless chatter about what I've been doing or am going to be doing, repeating things from earlier visits, since she doesn't really remember any of the details (or indeed a lot of the generalities). It's upsettingly easy to

talk with her, since you can essentially have the same conversation every visit and for her it's new every time. Like Thursday's visit, this one is cut a bit short as she announces "You can leave now, I want to have a sleep", proving that she has lost none of her regal demeanor. It has, of course, been *lovely* to see me. I spend a by now customary few minutes chatting with

the staff member and hearing once more how they all “love Vera to death”, I hope not literally. They’ve been working on getting her into better physical condition to the point where she can now walk up and down the corridor a bit instead of having to be wheelchaired about. This is welcome news.

Hitchin market is slightly less than bustling, since I don’t get there until 3 o’clock or so, but I do manage to find a nice little watch which resembles the one mum used to have, so I snag that up for £6 and am well pleased. I also head to Merrick’s sweetshop on the corner of the Arcade, still also amazingly there, and indulge myself with a pound (er, sorry 0.4 kilogram) of dolly mixtures! There’s also a Waterstone’s which until now I have inexplicably failed to notice, and being down to the last few pages of Stuey Ungar decide I need a refill. A 3 for 2 deal nets me *Agent Zigzag*, a biography of WW2 criminal and spy Eddie Chapman, Bob Woodward’s *State of Denial* (Bush at War Part III), and Ian Rankin’s *The Naming of the Dead*. John had earlier suggested and recommended Rankin, but later when he sees the book adds: “Well, I haven’t read any but apparently he’s a mate of Banksie’s”. I see.

I stick my head in the Victoria again, and the larger-than-life Tony (no mean feat at 5 foot 6) is this time belly up to the bar! We spend a very pleasant couple of hours catching up and sharing stories, and I notice that Tony still has his remarkable facility for finishing your sentences with you as you speak them. A testament to our closeness, perhaps. I learn that a stint of round-the-world yachting often consists of leaving things on jetties, barely making sail time by ten minutes after riotous trips ashore, and certain crewmen (not Tony)

spending quite some time below recovering from riotous trips ashore. At least, this would seem to be the *de rigueur* if you’re sailing on the Irish boat. Now I’ve always been quite prideful of the fact that I’m often told I don’t look my age – most people tend to guess early forties these days, given that the gray hairs have started to show out – but Tony has me well beat in this department. Not remembering, I had guessed we were more or less of an age, commented on how great he’s looking (hardly a day over 40), and am totally gobsmacked to learn he’s just turned sixty!! We chatter happily away until about 9, at which point I determine that the Guinness has done it’s work and I should probably toddle off. The customary exchange of electronic contact details takes place, and again missing the train by 5 minutes, I call John and, since he probably isn’t too pissed yet, manage to persuade him to scoop me up at Hertford North to save me the taxi fare. The previous night’s Balti leftovers make an acceptable late dinner.

Sunday is a thoroughly lazy day, spent dicking around with LJ and such, exchanging a few emails and failing to write this instalment of the trip journal. “No-one cares”, observes Bacon in a reply post, “Or maybe they’re just all out”. “Should be out fucking”, I opine wistfully. Plans for the week begin to coalesce, however: Croydon Tuesday for the bash chez James, Tun Thursday, then a delightful phone call from Martin Tudor sets up a wingding at Tony Berry’s joint Saturday afternoon/evening, so off to Brum I shall go. The lovely Midge is duly advised of these arrangements and pledges to tool over from Nottingham to attend, reasoning that it may be *another* fifteen years before we see each other again.

Chapter Four

Back in Maryland it's colloquially known as "jail stink", this being the means by which us offenders recognize each other and are recognized when back out on the street. Apparently this also works outside the US, which is how I came to meet Heidi, but more of that later.

I'd finally received an email back from United about my change of reservation, a spectacularly useless paragraph telling me to call the customer service number I already had. This I do, and am connected to a polite but generally unhelpful poppador in an imaginary office in the wilds of la-la land. I'm inquiring about changing my original return date (from the 17th to the 10th, or the 9th, or the 11th...), and also into the possibility that I can fly out of Birmingham International, since I'll be up that way on the weekend. In addition to a \$200 fee, all this will involve a "fare recalculation", which will take three to four hours to complete since it is being carried out by a team of coolies with abaci somewhere off the Ho Chi Minh trail. All this rather buggers my plans for the day, since I'll now need to wait until noon or so to call BB and get her card details for the payment.

She is not best pleased, since we may be dipping into the rent money at this point, but I make the case that (a) I can't afford to stay another week, and (b) I'll earn the \$200 back with a little more than a day's work. Thus armed with card numbers, I call United back to be told that the coolies are still hard at it and haven't come up with anything yet. My plans for the day, which had included a trip back to the tattoo shop to get BB's dragon gift and another to a Stevenage sports shop to get a

footy shirt for the Evil Stepdaughter, are now reduced to getting in the visit to mum.

Entrained once more, I tool off to Baldock and the thirty minute walk to the nursing home. My feet are starting to grumble a bit, but I console myself with the thought that I'm walking off all the food instead of packing on the pounds, and also realize that I'm looking forward to going back to work next week, if the coolies manage to come up with something palatable. Mum is asleep in a chair, not in her accustomed spot, but I sit down beside her and hold her hand gently until she wakes up a moment later. I have the watch for her which I'd bought at Hitchin market, and of course immediately notice that she is wearing one! "Found your watch then mum?" "Ooh, yes, I'm ever so pleased!" "Well, I got you another one!" She is actually demonstrably pleased by the gift, which I explain will now be her "Sunday best" watch, and can be considered an early birthday present, since I'll be back in the States by then. On September 27th she will attain the grand age of 86. The disconnect between her physical and mental condition is strange to observe. I judge that she is physically looking better every day, and I hope that my visits have perked her up and contributed to this, if in a small way. We hold hands for most of my visit, and her grip is happily firm. The conversation could have been written by Burroughs, in the sense that it's quite cut up and random. At times she thinks her parents, in reality long dead, are waiting for her at home, and at one point she asks me if she is married. I can tell her that she was married until dad died in 1981, and am glad to be able to describe this wise and happy union. "You did well, mum. He was a lovely man." "Yes, he was", she agrees. It has been *lovely* to see me, and I

am quite uplifted by how well she looks, and by the length of the visit. "Have I got old?", she asks me at one point. I do actually consider this for a moment, carefully looking at her in frank appraisal. Honestly and happily, I say "No mum, you look wonderful!" But being me, I have to add: "Oh wait, I think there's *one* more wrinkle there by your eye!", eliciting a little giggle with a charmingly girlish lilt. As usual, our farewell is a little teary, but I promise to return Wednesday, assuming, I think to myself, that I survive Tuesday night with Bacon and guests.

Back at Baldock station, I reconnect with Mr. Poppadum at United, who is overjoyed to tell me that the coolies have done their work, and the flight change will cost me \$400 and change, this in addition to the \$200 change fee, which is more than the whole bloody flight cost in the first place. Not an option, I tell him as a King's Lynn train roars through on the opposite platform. We continue our verbal tennis: "OK, Heathrow on the 10th?" "Let me check sir. I'm sorry, your class of booking is not available." "The 11th?" "Not available." (Deep sigh) "12th?" "Not available". The whole business seems cut out of the great tradition of British racism: "Sorry, we don't like your class of booking in here..." At this point Poppadum has some kind of brainstorm and comes up with a sparrow fart flight out of Heathrow to Amsterdam on the 10th where, after 5 hours, I will connect to the same flight I would have taken a week later, getting back into Dulles mid-afternoon. "Yes, yes! Here's the card numbers", I gabble, trying to get this locked in as quickly as possible before he changes his mind or one of the coolies discovers that they skipped a bead.



During the course of this transaction I manage the rather unusual feat of missing a train which is two feet in front of me, since juggling the phone, pen, writing material (the envelope *Banana Wings* came in, thanks chaps) and my shoulder bag means that, short of whipping my todger out, I am unable to push the button that opens the bloody door!

Relieved that my travel is now secure, I get the next train. Baldock to Hertford North involves a train change, a bit of a pain for what's really quite a short journey, and confusing at times because the schedule is rather erratically designed. The sequence of stations is: Baldock, Letchworth Garden City, Hitchin, Stevenage, Watton-at-Stone, Hertford North. Changes can be made at Letchworth, Hitchin or Stevenage, but most of the time Stevenage is actually best since

many of the trains terminate there rather than at Letchworth. Being in no particular rush, I detrain at Hitchin since there's a small shop on the platform where I can get beer. The next Hertford train running through Hitchin is a few hours away, so I hop on the next train and hop off at Stevenage, which is where I meet Heidi. Birds of a feather, it seems, since she has also just got out of jail and is looking to get to Chesunt, which means a taxi from Hertford North to Hertford East to switch train lines. She is skint, though in possession of a bottle of vodka and some impressive junkie tattoos, but possessed of an odd attraction which is (a) characteristic of a good thief, and (b) a reminder that I'm suffering from lack of nooky. We get to Hertford North, where I offer to buy her a drink at the Bridge House pub across the street and give her a fiver for the taxi. This I

do, but apparently old habits die hard and she starts dipping the joint, a process which in half-drunk bewilderment I am induced to abet. Realizing this is quite a bad idea, actually, I persuade her to cross the road to the taxi rank, where I am relieved of the shirt off my back and beat a welcome retreat in a taxi of my own, back to John and Eve's.

Checking mails and journals, I find Faith, a YM chat pal, and feeling a bit guilty attempt to expiate the evening through her. She is so disgusted with me that she never wants to speak to me ever again, so we ritually remove each other from our friends lists. Chastened and depressed, I adjourn to bed, only to wake up at 3:30am, fully alert but still disconcerted. Back to the mails, and a welcome YM chat with Beth Abbott, whose birthday it is (or was, from the time zone I'm in), and this cheers me up quite considerably. I check train times, tube strike news and other items of jollity and more or less happily decamp to East Croydon.

A number of curtailed phone calls and some Oirish directions later, I am through the green door of Bacon Towers, beer in hand and ready for a siesta which will be needed to prepare me for the forthcoming depredations of body and spirit. The joint is a very pleasant little town house within a reasonable walk of the station and with a couple of pubs on the way, at which I had been forced to stop to get less Oirish directions. A compact but well-laid out three floor job with a suitable complement of dogs and close proximity to suitable sources of curry and drink. The lad has fell on his feet here, I think. Refreshed from my little rest, I am left to guard the turrets as the bhoys goes to fetch his beloved who has returned from her daily toils, so I am required to keep the dogs at bay as

fishlifters, Nolley and the gorgeous pouting Max arrive, a slightly panting James and an accompanying vision of loveliness not far behind. Liam completes the party, and we are treated to a decent amount of various curries for which I have been detailed to cook the rice, which of course is Oirishly slightly foxed by a certain person lifting the lid on the pan, luckily allowing me to blame him for the half inch of grain stuck to the bottom. A highly pleasant evening ensues, and it is well nice to be able to see some of my closest friends like this, since I expect the Tun on Thursday might be a bit of a scrum. We chat away about all sorts, I get good boo for the trip journal, and take Claire mildly to task for apparently having succumbed to the ballet shoe craze. The evening seems to pass quite quickly, but I will see most of them again Thursday and perhaps Sunday, except for the increasingly rotund Nolley who has other stuff going on, so I am well pleased to have seen him here. I learn of a local Sunday get-together from Liam and this seems to be a pleasant way to pass the few hours I'll have in London before spending another night at Heathrow, hopefully this time without having my luggage stolen en route.

The next morning brings pleasant reflection of what lovely friends I'm lucky enough to have, as I type these words at Bacon's kitchen table.

Chapter Five

In a rare synchronistic success, I believe I have timed my departure from the Sign of the Scalded Scrotum to perfection, since I calculate that by the end of this Friday evening I shall have consumed all the beer John had. Today has been a lazy one, rather like Sunday had been, and once

again the best-laid plans of sorting photographs, packing and – er – writing trip journal instalments are pushed further and further into the evening hours as I slob around in my jammie bottoms. As my LJ namesake would observe, it hav all come to o.

I tooled around London a bit after leaving James about noon Wednesday, and didn't arrive back at John and Eve's until about 4, too late really to visit mum that day, so I rework my plans and figure to go see her on Thursday, then head down to the Tun meet after that, which will then give me all day Friday to get sorted out and packed. I don't need to go out gift-buying now on account of being close to skint.

I've been so happily impressed by what I saw as a little progress in mum over the course of my visits these last couple of weeks, so it was a bit of a shock when I got there Thursday morning and she failed to recognize me. I have to remind her who I am, but I whisper this into her ear since yelling at her might be a bit inappropriate. "Nicolas", I whisper. "My son?", she asks. Yes, it seems I still am. The rest of the conversation is as sadly predictable as the last couple have been. Almost every visit she's mentioned how she hasn't seen her friend Ruby for weeks (or months). My cousin actually arranged to pick Ruby up and bring her over there for a visit one time, but they told me mum didn't seem to recognize her and didn't talk to her the whole time she was there. Ruby hasn't called since, though I wonder whether a bit of lack of sympathy isn't half the culprit. After all, if I have to tell my own mother who I am, what chance does anyone else have? Add to this the fact that she really can't see much further than the end of her nose, I can easily understand how someone who might expect to be

recognized but isn't, so sits off to the side without saying anything all night would get ignored. Having a snit about it isn't going to help. I try to impress on mum that this will be the last time I'll see her for a while, but that I'll continue to phone every week as usual, so it will have to be *lovely* to hear from me instead of *lovely* to see me for the foreseeable future. I go over this a few times, and it really does seem as though she understands if you're sufficiently patient with her in the conversation, but as I have come to realize, it's quite likely that she'll have forgotten I even came to visit by this time tomorrow. I spend a few minutes at the front desk on the way out, making sure I have the proper full address for the joint, and make a point of telling them that I am very pleased with the place and the level of care mum is getting. Turns out my cousin's wife's sister has a connection with them, which is how it was found, and quite possibly how mum got in. Very good, then.

Back to the train station with a brief stop to grab beer and a sausage baguette. My timing is getting much closer to the wire, as this time I actually see the train arrive and leave as I walk up the station approach, so I nosh my lunch on the platform in the company of Ian Rankin and Inspector John Rebus, who for whatever reason I keep visualising as Robbie Coltrane. I get into Kings X about 2ish, fire off a text to Liam, who proves himself a master of the obvious by noting that I am early. Remembering that I promised postcards to the lads still inside, I kill a few minutes by picking out some London ones at W H Smug, five or ten minutes writing them, and half an hour in the Post Office across the street (half a bloody hour!) waiting in line to get stamps to send same. This achieved, I tube it to Chancery Lane,

and casually stroll along the general directions provided by Swiss Tony, which prove to be not Oirish in any way at all.

The Melton Mowbray pleasantly surprises me, given some of the rather grottier accommodations the Tun meeting has occupied over the years. I especially enjoy the lovely-looking bar staff with tits and ballet shoes, though not quite so sure about the one with a dick and ballet shoes. I pass a more or less pleasant couple of hours with Guinness and tits providing the more pleasant parts and Ian Rankin providing some rather more ho-hum ones. I suppose my expectations were pitched too high. There's really nothing wrong with the book at all, it's just a decent average read.

The cellar bar opens at 6, I am told by tits and ballet shoes, and just before that I am outside for a smoke when I spot Brian Ameringen loitering with intent. We catch up for a moment then repair to the downstairs where the evening quickly gets into full swing. The generosity of the assembly proves to be such that my beer-buying is already over for the night, but not my beer consumption. I manage to chitchat with many, many old friends whom I haven't seen for ages, some not since Tuesday in fact. Croydon crew aside, Doug Spencer and Julia Daly provide entertaining dialogue, and we recall a past Novacon where she was the cause of some serious scarification of my back. Several moments of fine conversation with the likes of Avedon Carol, Caroline Mullan, Roger Robinson, Dave Lally and others of what I like to think of as the "old school" are scattered at pleasing intervals. "Ish that who I think it ish?", I slurrily inquire of a passing fishlifter, indicating a blonde vision which has entered my periphery. It is indeed Persephone Hazard, none other.

"And there's the New Future Of Fandom", Mark remarks, pointing out John Coxon, "He's only 18!". "Ah", I say, while thinking he actually looks 12. Old, old friend (and looking even older), Pat Lennon shares more than a few moments and we reminisce over old times and tattoos. I casually mention that I have, though perhaps a little half-heartedly, been trying to find our mutual friend Tara. Pat's expression undergoes a full transformation from his usual manic grin, and before I have the chance to wonder why, "She's dead", he tells me, "Last year". Apparently she'd been diagnosed with some kind of inoperable brain tumor (though I may have this wrong), but in any event was given 5 to 10 years to live. "She went 12", says Pat. Stubborn to the last, I think. Except for the venue and circumstances, I would have said I was sobered by this news, but being a Tun the opposite is true. Tara had a main role in a piece I'd written in *Arrows of Desire* many years ago, confessing to incidences of unpleasant behavior on my part (and directed toward her). She also wrote a reply piece as a follow up. We had a drawn out and interesting relationship. These days I suppose we'd have been called "fuck buddies", but the term wasn't in use back then, and in any case doesn't do the situation justice. In what was probably one of the more unusual untold episodes of my life, she once gave me a bj while riding in the top of a London bus and deliberately left her chewing gum inside my foreskin, which I didn't even notice until later by which time it had worked its way out and generally made a mess of things!

Eve is now lurking on LJ as "yvonne_101", and I wonder what she'll make of that when she reads that, by which time I shall have left her tender care. A pause here for infinite thanks to her and John for

domiciling me for most of this visit and feeding and watering me so well. Friday night's dinner was an excellent Thai repast of fish soup, chicken curry with rice and stir fry veg, and I am promised a substantial and traditional fry-up to set me on my way to Birmingham and 'FarCon L', as Martin Tudor has mischievously dubbed the Saturday party. My train leaves in a little less than four hours, so I had better go pack.

Chapter Six

Tony Berry stole my bird!

A little history: ZZ9ers of a certain vintage will remember "Grandad" John Philpott, who would often declaim to all and sundry, "Nic Farey stole my bird!", which really did happen on more than one occasion, most notoriously at a convention when, after having stolen John's bird, I also persuaded him out of his room key so I might indulge in various activities of a plunging nature, since I was probably either married or with someone else at the time. Also memorably, there was one particular individual, who to the best of my recollection was not wearing ballet shoes but had everything else, whom we had both noticed and were both leching after at the Brighton Worldcon. The fact that I was there with Wifey #1 did not prevent my ultimate theft of his dreams, although I had occasion later to demand that he thank me since she gave me a dose of the crabs, which on balance, though, was actually worth

it. The ultimate expression of this ongoing saga happened at ErotiCon Six, where for the dress-up on Saturday night I was cleaned of all facial hair, dressed up in a rather fetching and sexy frock (complete with stockings and suspenders!), had my then quite long hair teased out and was expertly made up by the previously mentioned Tara. Thus attired, I managed to breeze past several people who knew me quite well indeed without being recognized, including John, who once he had realized who this vision of loveliness in fact was, perfectly concluded the whole thing by remarking: "Nic Farey *is* my bird!"

Th train journey from Hertford North to New Street (via Euston) is fairly unremarkable, thanks in part to Ian Rankin. I'm already getting tired of dragging my big pack around, since it now weighs about four times what it did on my arrival, thanks to the abundance of family photo albums I have retrieved. Ten minutes or so before actual detrainment, I get a call from Midge who has just arrived herself. I

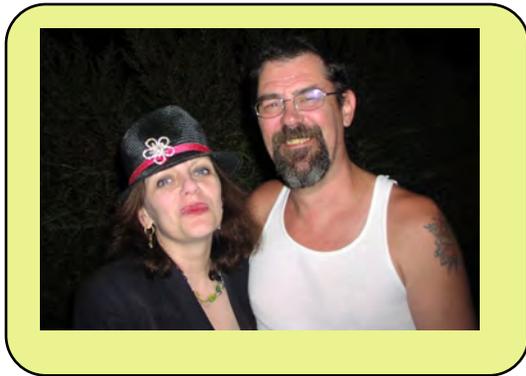
get there and we manage to find the same smoking area ("Hell-ooooo darling!", she cries), just across the street from the Comfort Inn where she is booked in for the night at a very reasonable 50 quid. She is not wearing ballet shoes, but rather a pair of impressive wedgies, although I am less impressed (and tell her so) by the blue toenail varnish, a color I've always found to be rather jarring. Other acoutrements are happily in their accustomed place. The big pack is dragged down a few flights of piss-covered stairs across the street to the hotel, where she



Bastard!

books in and I wait in the bar. On her return from dumping the over night bag, of which I am insanely jealous, we share some old photographs, hers of unnamed media conventions 15 years ago, mine of family 45 years ago. Having been already advised of my perilous financial condition at this point, it is a happy development when Midge pays for the taxi from the hotel to Tony's. We are welcomed in, Midge is introduced ("Hell-ooooo, darling!"), and I dump the big pack as we get directions to the nearest fags & booze emporium.

I had recognized Midge from 100 feet or



so as she'd approached the exit by which I had been smoking at New Street station, and I reflect that my rather new tri-focal glasses must be quite good actually, as I spot Martin Tudor and daughter Heloise from a similar if not greater distance as Midge and I are walking out to the shops. "No-one else walks like that!", I observe to her at the time. Failing to persuade the ATM at the store to give me any money, a result I'd expected since my prepaid Visa card is (a) not often recognized by machines in the UK, and (b) tapped anyway, I am back to cheap beer and cigarettes while she buys a decent bottle of wine and a bottle of Moet (!!), which I consider likely to prove the undoing of us

all, although it will transpire that I am only partially correct in this. Back chez Berry, we stow the drinks appropriately, I pass on to Martin an envelope of MiSCon stuff copied by the Harveys for a piece I believe he's doing for Pete Weston's *Prolapse*, while he in turn hands me some apology emails and best wishes from people who can't make it: the Greens, Pam Wells, Rog Peyton and the Weston himself among them. I dig out what I deem to be my GoH photograph (me and my father c.1961) which is reverently placed upon the outside table across from the barbecue grill where there will soon be sausages.



And we are off to the races! Richard Standage is also already in place, and it isn't too long before the full party has arrived: Helena Tudor, Hicks and Cat and, most welcome, the Lawsons, since Martin has informed me that Steve Lawson is in fact The Weather God, with sunshine inevitably following wherever he goes, although there is scant evidence of rings on his fingers and bells on his toes, and in any case that's music, of which there is already sufficient. Helena Bowles eventually completes the assembly, just arrived from work and apparently determined to catch up as quickly as

possible. Midge is introduced to all as they arrive ("Hell-oooo, darling!"), and possibly due to tits and not ballet shoes proves triflically popular with a certain segment of those here (i.e. the blokes), and enhances this popularity among all with the opening and distribution of the Moet and the taking of what she charmingly refers to as "team photos", accompanied with exhortations to "Move in a little bit, darling", which will prove to be prophetic for Tony later.

Despite his complaints about the quality (or lack thereof) of the charcoal ("It's crap!"), the grill is soon a fire, encouraged by suitable applications of citronella oil. The burgers are the first to test its efficacy, soon to be followed by sausages, chicken, ribs, sausages, hot dogs, more chicken and sausages. I think I'll have a couple of sausages, since by this time I have been persuaded to abandon my cheap beer in favor of some rather nice real ale that Steve Lawson has provided, presumably specifically to go with the sausages. We also break out the remainder of the half bottle of Jim Beam Black I have left from my duty free purchases on the way in, which a grateful nation (a grateful Helena Bowles, certainly,) fairly pounces on. As the hour draws later, into the realms of earlier in fact, those not staying begin to drift away, and as so often has happened I find myself attached to Martin Tudor,

limpet-like, as we drift further into the wee small hours and become maudlin. I really don't know why this happens, just that it often does, and it's indeed true that I've considered him a brother in all but biological certitude for lo, these many years. Neither of us has typically been overtly emotional except, it seems, with each other. Rather than being saddened by any of this, my secret tears are tears of happiness at our continued closeness, a bond that I am always reminded to feel



Blokes!

will never be broken by neither time nor distance. At some point during these proceeds, I have a vague recollection of Midge brushing past me with Tony Berry by the hand, for what it is revealed later has been a substantial, if surprising and thorough polishing. Tony Berry stole my bird!

The next morning, or at least a daybreak-like part of it, finds me sneaking out to the shop for smoking materials, but not before gently raising Martin's head and placing the single pillow we have been provided underneath. I return, smoke, and doze in the chair for another hour or two, which is just as well since an eventually waking Tudor informs me that we were up until 3, maybe even 4am! The gradual process of awakening filters through the house, and various farewells are undertaken, though not before a frantic phone call and subsequent visit by Midge, who has "Lost my filofax, darling!", subsequently

discovered right next to where I had been sleeping and presumably abandoned in a hurry on the way to polishing activities. Tony's grin is obviously difficult to suppress, is in place the whole time he drives me to New Street, and is doubtless still there today.

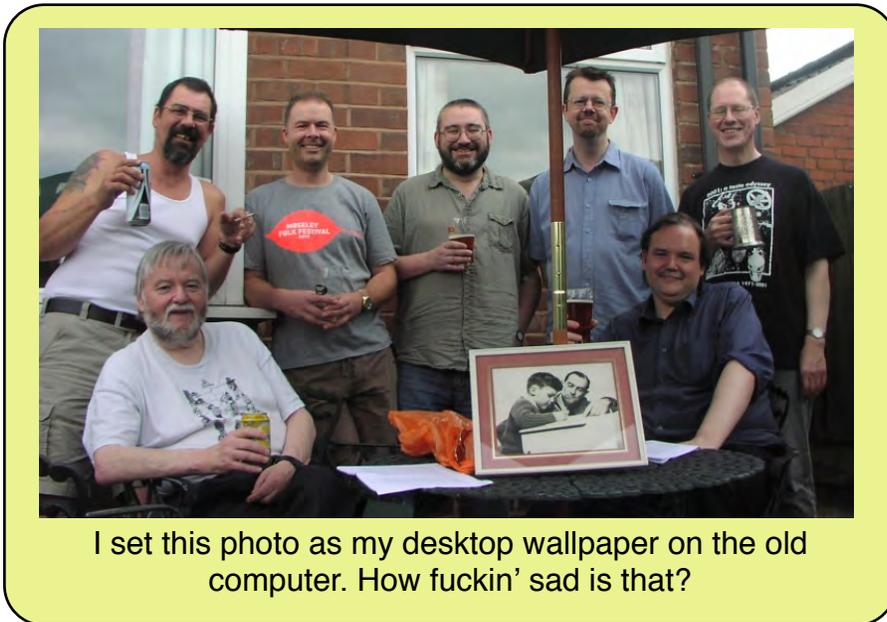
this I am content. I recount bits of the previous night, especially the sausages, and am quite pleasantly surprised with boo when asked if this journal can be reprinted in *Banana Wings*, which, if you're reading this while holding it in your hand, it either has been or I did it meself.

We leave at closing time and make our farewells at the tram stop. "It's been *lovely* to see you", Claire says, but I am too tired and beered up to be startled by this.

I successfully negotiate the tram to East Croydon and the train to Victoria, then tool along the Circle Line for a change to the Piccadilly, thence Heathrow, only to be informed by a rather stropy station announcement that I have missed the last train

by twenty minutes, which I

wearily judge to be at least better than missing it by five. The big pack, getting raggedier by the moment, is dragged onto the District Line to Ealing Broadway where I reason that I may be able to get a train, or at least a bus to the airport. Asking the varied drunks and late night detritus of the area proves less than useful, especially since I am at this point desperate for a leak, eventually settling on the partially shielded back of a tree by the taxi shelter. Finally a half helpful bus driver gives me "Greenwell, one-oh-five", pointing in the general direction of other stops. I find a stop with a bus to Greenwell departing in about 10 minutes at 1:05am, and reason that I must have figured it out. A further enquiry to the driver of this bus reveals that the 24-hour 105 bus goes to



More uneventful train travel, arriving eventually at East Croydon, where an exchange of text messages allows Liam to once again remark on my earliness. From trains, I have now graduated to missing trams which are right in front of me, but this actually works out rather well, as I reach the Claret and just barely manage to make a pint of Guinness last until fishlifters arrive, to be followed in short order by Jim de Liscard and the Proven One himself. Another evening of pleasantness and humor ensues. The Sainted One provides me with a twenty to "keep body and soul together" on the return trip, and by way of some semblance of fair exchange I bequeath the phone to them for future fannish purposes. Claire reasons it can be used for visitors from other shores, so in

TITS, SAUSAGES AND BALLET SHOES

Heathrow from Greenwell, so I marvel at the remarkable efficiency of the initial information I had been given. At Greenwell, I have now moved from just missing trains and trams, as I see the bus approach the intersection I am about to cross to get to the bus stop twenty yards away. Ah well, there's another one in half an hour.



Arriving at the airport at about 2:30am, I drift in and out of sleep, assisted by Ian Rankin, before the BMI desks finally open. Their self check-in machines have failed to recognize my reservation, so I am eventually directed to the ticket counter, where the lovely Stephanie, who speaks English, French, Italian, tits and ballet shoes, soon informs me: "Ah yes, your flight is *tomorrow*". Stephanie, however, takes pity on a weary traveller, and apparently not requiring teams of coolies, reschedules my flight and connection and

ensures my luggage will be transferred, so I am able to travel. My woes almost over, I get to Amsterdam and walk several miles to my transfer check in, where my booking is retrieved after a brief wait. "Has this flight been changed?", I am asked. "Well, yes" I admit, visions of Poppadums dancing in my head. "Okay", the woman says, brightly, and sure enough I eventually find myself in a United Airlines window seat next to what appears to be a member of the Dutch female shot-put team. Enduring these abbreviated accommodations, I doze fitfully on what seems an interminable journey, eventually arriving at Washington Dulles and dragging my by now partially disintegrated big pack through a bus journey to West Falls Church, Metro to Metro Center and Keller commuter bus back to St. Leonard, arriving just after 6:30pm.

Moments later BB shows up to collect me, and as I swing the big pack into the back seat, I say "We need to stop to get me a couple of cold ones. What's for dinner?". "Well", she says, "It was going to be sausages..."

Vera Betty Farey died on the morning of September 24, 2007, three days before her 86th birthday. She had been admitted to hospital the previous week suffering from a deep vein thrombosis. The last time I spoke to her is as recorded here.

Rest in peace, Mum. dad's been waiting for you.

Chapter Seven

So there was an Englishman and a Russian in a Mexican bar, which does sound as though it might be a mildly interesting joke, but is in fact me and Stan waiting for our respective planes in Concourse B at Dulles airport, his Aeroflot to Moscow having been delayed several hours until midnight, and my Virgin Atlantic bang on the money at ten after eleven. I'm spending too much money on a dinner which, under suave blandishments from the barman, is now consisting primarily of Dos Equis and tequila side shots. This of course makes me quite gregarious (and I always wondered whether a secondary definition of that word should be "Pickersgill-like"), so we chat merrily for an hour or so, sharing something of our life histories as émigrés, he having relocated to Reston in '95, me to Good Ole Suth'n Marelun in '93. Stan, whose given name is in fact Stanislav, as you might have guessed, is a dealer in rare and collectible musical instruments, so if you always wanted that 1957 Gibson guitar (and are willing to pay for it), Stan is your man, to be found at www.musicoutlet.ru, with offices in Moscow, St. Petersburg (and, presumably, Reston), and there, my friend, is the promised plug! Due to the usual media stereotyping (or perhaps the tequila), I imagine, or perhaps romanticize, that Stan is a secret Russian gangster, nevertheless with a heart of gold, which runs completely contrary to the observation that he is interesting, pleasant, and looks much more like Omar Sharif than Robbie Coltrane.

The previous couple of weeks have not exactly been an orgy of preparation for the unexpected continuation of the trip, but more like an orgy of trepidation with some

preparation thrown in. We were about at the point of financial recovery from my last sojourn when a series of phone calls throws all the spanners into the works at once. We'd been spending what's become a usual Friday early evening at Robert's Restaurant and Bar in Prince Frederick, getting back a little after eight to find a message on the machine that I should call cousin Harvey urgently. Being too late to do so at that point, I reset my alarm for 3am so I can get up and reach them first thing UK time, forgetting to watch *Doctor Who* in the process, and by this process learn from Jean that mum has been rushed to hospital with a more or less dead leg, and that amputation is likely. I call the hospital for some less alarmist information, and finding them as wonderfully sympathetic and helpful as in the past to a son who is 3,000 miles away, quickly learn that she has a DVT, which I have to have explained to me is a deep vein thrombosis, and no, they are not going to chop her leg off, having decided on a more conservative treatment since she wouldn't have very good odds of surviving such an operation. I thank the nurse, who gives me a likely schedule for mum's release back to the nursing home, and Google DVT to get better informed, learning that this is a blood clot situation with rather serious implications. I am happy that she is in good hands, however, and call Jean and Harvey back the following day, letting them know I have spoken to the hospital who have indicated that all should be proceeding well and mum will be getting out of there within a week. "I don't think that's very likely", opines the perpetually gloomy Jean, but it turns out we are both wrong in our respective ways.

Monday brings the phone message from Harvey: "I've got some sad news for you", and from his tome, which is even more

lugubrious than usual, I immediately know what that news must be. My researches have shown me that a deep vein thrombosis clot can easily dislodge and shift to the heart or lungs with fatal results, and, confirming the worst with a phone call, I deduce this is what has happened, since getting any actual information from the taciturn cousin is akin to finding a nugget of gold laying about on the streets of Walthamstow. The funeral is arranged for October 16th, apparently the longest delay possible, to give me time to sort out travel. For this I am grateful. We are still dealing with various degrees of skint, but my kindly and excellent employer lends me \$500 (and arranges to send flowers!), so with this and wages I am able to book a flight, buy a suit and pay half of October's rent to the also kind and understanding landlord Mike. Itineraries are discussed and arranged, and once again the generosity of fan friends makes places to stay the least of my worries.

I am quite cranky the last couple weeks at work, and my nasty side shows itself on a couple of occasions, earning me rather surprised looks from my workmate Woody, but he takes it all in his stride as usual. I occasionally feel like I'm on the verge of bursting into tears, avoiding this actually happening by imagining what that would look like and how embarrassing it would be, thereby, I suspect, merely postponing the inevitable. I get a call from my friend David, who has learned of my sad news by the expediency of meeting BB on an offchance. David is a professional counsellor, and fine friend that he is immediately offers to drop whatever clients he has at any given point if I feel the need to talk about it. Considering this, I tell him with heartfelt sincerity that the mere fact of knowing that he is there for me and would do this makes it less likely

that I would need it. The rally round is happening for me, and I am quite bolstered, and indeed more than a little humbled by this.

My sociability at the Mexican bar continues onto the plane, aided in part by the *much* nicer experience of flying with the affable and efficient Virgin Atlantic rather than the grumpy and uncaring United, as previously. Never, ever again will I accept reduced service to save a hundred bucks. The ease, comfort and just general helpfulness of Virgin more than defrays the extra. On the flight, which is less than full, I meet another expat, Jim the ex-Marine who now resides in Finland with his wife & 3 kids. Apart from this detail, I find it difficult to recall too many of the specifics of our conversation, since not only am I still in a partial tequila daze, we start in on my duty free Jim Beam Black after dinner until a cabin attendant mentions to us (several hours later!), that we really shouldn't be doing that and would we mind stopping now. I am not entirely surprised to discover later that we managed to kill half the bottle between us. Throughout we are ministered to mostly by the lovely Aimee who, in common with all other things Virgin Atlantic is pleasant, helpful, efficient and quite beautiful. I make no apology for the fact that this might sound like an ad, but the truth is that Stan, Jim and Aimee have on this day collectively left me feeling far less funereal than I might have expected to otherwise.

We deplane to a pleasant Sunday morning, and Jim and I shake hands as we part ways, he to his Helsinki connection, me to London Transport and Croydon. Mark had sent me a three-page email with copious alternative methods for attaining the welcoming confines of Banana Towers from Heathrow, so of course I manage to

find a route other than one he has proposed. The largely uneventful journey is punctuated by a Nolley sighting on the tram, and the rotund one insists upon seeing me off the vehicle and ensuring I am pointed in the right direction, Mark's instructions notwithstanding. Almost at the top of the road, I see the Sainted One hisself walking out to meet me. "What? You think I couldn't find the fuckin' way?", is my greeting to him. I suspect I am expected to be fragile, and perhaps I am feeling that a little in a way that only tequila and Jim Beam can induce.

"Open the fuck up", I cry pleasantly, if loudly, through the letterbox, eliciting a giggle from Mark and an admonition from Claire, who nevertheless does open the fuck up with some alacrity. The portcullis is raised and I am admitted to what proves to be a very nice gaff indeed, possessing a little back garden with which I am to become familiar and am to sprinkle with cigarette ends. We have a little catch-up, Mark provides some back issues of *Private Eye* for my perusal, and I shortly decide to have a bit of a nap to soothe my ravaged body. I awake in time for Sunday night at the pub with a nice collection of the usual suspects, and this passes in a pleasant haze to be followed by an equally satisfying curry from Banana Towers' local joint. I sleep well, waking once to go out for a cig at about 3am, and once all are up and about I watch others eat breakfast while I consume my accustomed one (half a pot of coffee, half a pack of cigarettes), and tool out to East Croydon station accompanied by the overprotective Mark, equipped with copious itinerary options to Hertford North provided by a tenaciously organized Claire, all of

which I naturally ignore and travel by a different route.

The Sign of the Scalded Scrotum beckons once again, and after I am collected by Eve and John at the by now familiar Bridge House pub, I remark as we cross the threshold: "This is starting to feel like coming home!" The evening is as marvellously companionable as was the previous one, I occasionally doze in the chair and am fed beer and fish pie and fail to write the continuation of the trip report, which I decide I shall do in the morning, and am here as good as my intentions.

There is a shirt to iron and a grieving son to make presentable for his appearance in a couple of hours time. I feel like I might burst into tears now.

"I'm going to make some toast in a minute", sez Eve.

"Well, you go right ahead then", I reply.

"You don't want any? I reckoned you wouldn't want a *full* breakfast..."

This is indeed true. Eve's concept of a "full" breakfast could also be termed "Feed The World".

"No, no", I say, "I'll just stick to beer and cigarettes". The coffee had been downed earlier during the writing of Part 7.

I am, as we used to say back in Sarf Lunnun, "suited and booted". My appearance and demeanor meet with Eve's approval.

"I have peppermints", she sez, ever thoughtful and kind.

Chapter Eight

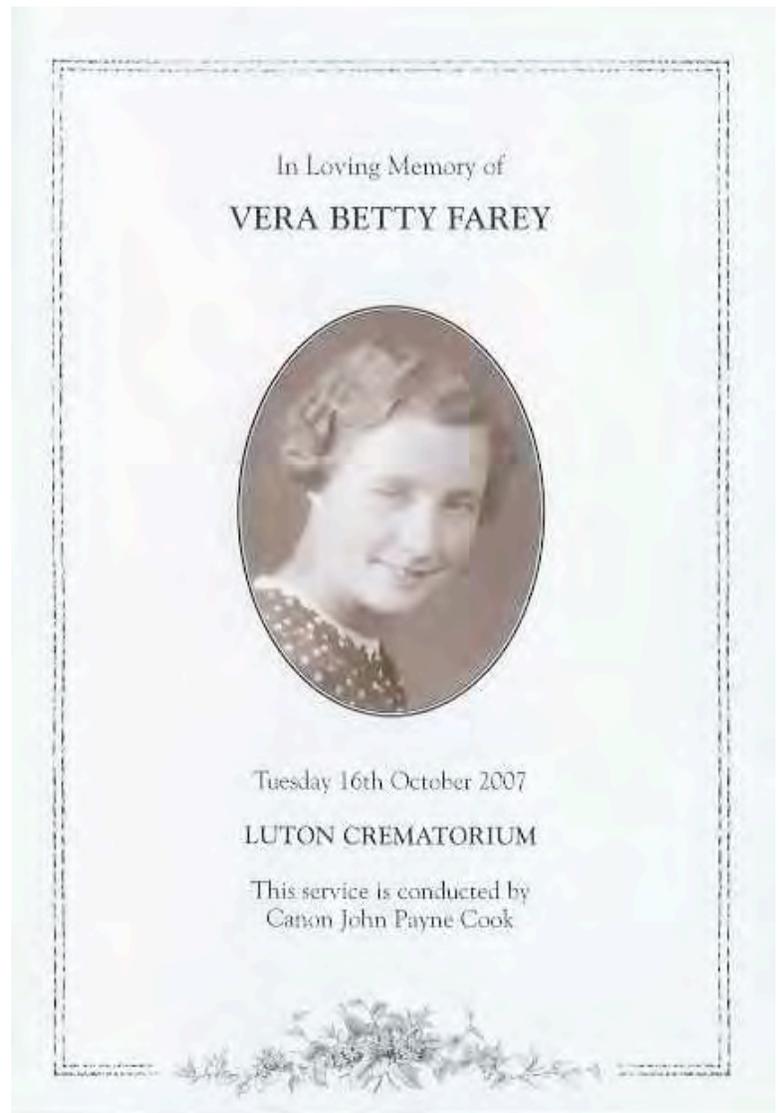
I suppose I could say that I'm feeling a bit numb, really, which may be better, or even more accurate, than saying that I've been too depressed or just too lazy to write this instalment. Yes, "numb" kind of covers it.

John and Eve had kindly offered to take me over to the farm where I was to take my place in the cortege, and we exit the house to a light drizzle which will persist all day. "Proper funeral weather", I observe. The arms of my suit jacket are just a little too long, so I experiment with various hand positions on the way to make this less apparent. I arrive at Elm Dene Farm, as planned, in plenty of time for our scheduled departure at 11:30, and am thus regaled with several minutes of complaints concerning my other cousin, Sheila, who is deemed to have contributed bugger all to the organization of this somber proceeding and is, indeed bloody late, which is deemed extremely disrespectful. "Not worth getting upset about, Jean", I offer. "Oh, I'm *not* upset!", she half snaps, becoming more agitated the while. "I won't be losing any sleep over it", I reply in an attempt to soothe.

We leave *sans* Sheila and her husband John, who will have to make their own way to the Crematorium, a decision it transpires they had already made since they are already there when we later arrive. This does little to temper Jean's mood, since the proprieties apparently dictate that Harvey, Sheila and I, as mum's closest relatives, *should* have ridden together in the car following the hearse. I idly wonder whether there will be a fight at the wake. The

journey passes amid safe platitudes about how nice the car rides and comments about the weather, and I feel I keep my end of the dull chat up just enough to not be considered sulky.

Having been expecting, or told to expect, perhaps six people at the funeral, I am more than pleased to see a small crowd of 20 or 30 as we exit the car. Most of these people haven't seen me (or I them) in fifteen years or more, and it takes me a moment in several cases to reconnect names to faces and to relationships. All three of Harvey and Jean's kids are there



with their respective spouses. Beverley's husband, whose name sadly remains unremembered but who is a Good Bloke, is the first to look me straight in the eye, shake my hand and ask me how I'm doing, and also the first to utter a phrase I am going to hear several times over the next couple of hours: "I didn't recognize you with the beard". And here are Donald and Barbara ("Do you remember us?"), who used to visit mum many years ago and bring homemade fairy cakes which I remember as being very good, and whom I haven't seen in probably 20 years. A few more hellos and handshakes are interrupted by Jean introducing me to the Rev. John Payne Cook, who is a very nice chap indeed, and indicates that we are ready to begin.

Harvey and Jean, myself and Sheila and John lead the procession to the seats, where we of course have reserved spots right in the very front row, just like Sally Simpson. The rest are haphazardly inserted behind, with mum's best friend Ruby, now rather frail, accompanied by her daughter Anna in the row behind, a fact I shall become well aware of when the hymn singing starts. The coffin is carried in by the attendants and placed gently on the stand, and in accordance with respectful tradition, they all bow lightly to the casket as they step away. It is at this point that I begin to quietly cry.

Jean and Harvey seem to have done a fiercely efficient job with all the arrangements. The photograph which adorns the cover of the memorial service book is, amazingly, one I have never seen before, although I have several of mum when she was around the same age (late teens/early twenties). She'd also found a list of mum's favorite hymns to choose from for the service, although managed to

pick an opening hymn (*O Lord My God*) which I didn't recognize at all. Since they were the ones who supplied the Rev. Payne Cook with the details needed for his address, I considered a number of factual errors had crept or were inserted in, including a remark that mentioned she'd been suffering from dementia since 2003 (2005 at a push is more like it), and the conspiracy theorist in me wonders if this is a deliberate ploy to gig the will, since I remember around then we'd discussed "what might happen", and her specifically saying "Well, of course you'll get the house". By my guess, the new will was made up around '01 or '02. It's still a guess because at this point its contents have still not been revealed to me, although I get the impression that everyone else around knows what's in it. Ugh – bad thoughts to be having in the middle of a funeral.

As the Rev. continues his encomium I, with some tears still making their escape along my cheek, notice character similarities between mum and me. He notes that, although generally well-liked by many and loved by some, she wasn't considered particularly sociable, a trait I've noticed increasingly in myself, and something which will surprise many who know me well. I often used to consider that there was an "Everyday Nic" and a "Convention Nic", who might well have been thought of as two separate people, and might also help explain the happy coexistence of my alter ego "S V O'Jay" for those many years. This is notwithstanding an interlude in the mid-90s with an individual described by the Sainted One as "Baby Pictures Nic", who made an appearance at a Novacon but proved to be a mere veneer over the Real Thing. Mum was described as not having many close friends, however, a situation which I am fortunate to say does not apply to me,

though I wouldn't be so crass as to name them here. In recent years it seems to take a lot to actually get me to go out and be sociable in public, though of course there isn't exactly a pub on every corner where I live, and driving not being an option means that any trips out not for work tend to be of the mundane grocery shopping and movie rental variety. Add to this the fact that most if not all of my closest friends are in the UK, and this leads to an almost Warner-like existence spent, not writing letters, but spending far too much time basking in cathode rays, to the varying annoyance of BB, who nevertheless quite dislikes "Convention Nic", I think. In hindsight, the quite excellent reportage of the Sainted One in his "write this down" Novacon vignette in *Banana Wings* many years ago perhaps documented the beginnings of an integration of "Convention Nic" and "Everyday Nic", albeit into someone who is still a recognizable version.

The final hymn is one I most definitely recognize as one of mum's favorites: *The Day Thou Gavest*, and I recognize Ruby's voice from the pew behind, still quite strong and tuneful despite her increased frailty. It is a fine voice which she used to entertain on many occasions in the past, and I am happy that it is raised here, knowing that mum would be pleased herself. Commendation, committal and blessing follow, and inevitably we exit to *Amazing Grace*, not given to eye-rolling triteness, but in the knowledge that this was also one of her very favorite tunes. Outside in the continuing drizzle it appears that I am the only smoker in the entire party, (although Jean had succumbed to the need for "a couple of puffs" before we left the farm) distancing myself in the designated area. I am approached and consoled by several

people, including my Aunt Muriel and cousin Nicola. Muriel married my father's brother Maurice, who I am told was not able to leave the house as he, too, is housebound and awaiting hip operations. I am a little surprised to see Muriel in particular. She is a very small woman who always left me with the impression that she might break any minute, but it seems the years have given her a kind of wiry toughness. Nicola, on the other hand, is what we used to call "raw-boned", a six foot Amazon who in earlier days could have been the typical farm girl who puts the lads to shame by carrying twice what they can. She is wearing her work ID badge, which identifies her as "Nicky", and I tell her how pleased I am that she's taken that name on since it's something I've always hated to be called. Soon enough, I am summoned back to the car as we must now make the trip back to Hitchin to the Firs Hotel, where a spread has been laid on.

Not only am I the only person smoking, I am also the only person drinking for a while until Harvey decides he might like a couple of Bacardi and cokes. I content myself with a modest succession of glasses of Stella, while the tea and coffee proves much more popular with the rest of the assemblage. Dutifully, I spend a few moments with everyone, thanking them for turning out, sharing the occasional reminiscence and, disconcertingly, echoing "Lovely to see you". There is too much food, Jean frets, and I do not help the situation by having very little appetite. Quite quickly, it seems, people begin to take their leave, and several allude to the fact that I will likely not see any of them again soon, if ever. Those left are going back to the farm to regroup, and I am asked if I am coming along. I ask Harvey if there's any paperwork I need to see or sign or anything, a broad hint I thought, which

is dismissed with a demeanor of mild surprise. "Perhaps you'll come and see us before you go", says Jean.

As I write these words (on Friday morning), John has already asked me what time I'd like to go over to the farm to do the farewell with Harvey and Jean, try to see if I can get a copy of the will, and also hopefully hit them up for some or all of my plane fare. "I'll call first to make sure they'll be there", I tell him. As the morning draws on and he pops back downstairs from his office for something, "I might leave it till tomorrow", I say. "Oh? Why's that?" "Because this is taking a long time". "Ah. Right."

I remember playing on the farm with their son David, who is a year or two younger than me, often during our summers, although in later years I became closer with Beverley, who is just a little older than me and is mum's god-daughter. I dated *her* cousin Jane for a while, which meant we were socializing together quite a bit at the time. Declining the trip to the farm on the general grounds that it makes more sense for me to walk to Hitchin station from the Firs than get a taxi from the farm, several miles out of town, I walk to the foyer with my arm around Bev as we share a smiling moment. It has been genuinely good to see her. Perhaps portentously, I leave out one door as everyone else departs through another, and emerging into the still-drizzling day I begin the mental process of shutting it all down, and feeling overly conspicuous in my suit and tie walk to the train station, where I inevitably miss the Hertford North train by four minutes, having stopped in the Nightingale for a pint of Guinness.

Chapter Nine

I do in fact make it to Harvey and Jean's on Friday, for what turns out to be an unexpectedly pleasant visit. I had curtailed my narrative upon leaving the Nightingale and just missing yet another train for reasons as much to do with the clock as that being a convenient point of abandonment. From Hitchin I'd taken the next train to Stevenage in hopes of picking up a Hertford train, but still ended up on the one that came through Hitchin anyway. Having called the Sign of the Scalded Scrotum earlier, I knew John was out and about, so there was no rush, really – I still needed to wait upon his return.

I arrive at Hertford North, and as per usual cross the street to the Bridge House. The barman there had remembered me from my previous sojourn, so when I got in to Hertford on the Monday we had a little chat in which he was apprised of the sad reason for this visit. This time I mosey in, undoubtedly looking suitably mournful in my suit, and dragging up a half smile, say "Pint of Stella please mate". As he pours I count out £3 onto the bar and slide it forward. "Nah, that one's on me, mate", he says, earning him a look of mild surprise and gratitude. "Not every day yer bury yer mother", he clarifies. It is a small kindness, one of many which have made this trip much less of an ordeal than it might otherwise have been. My second home at the Scalded Scrotum is in a whole other category, however, but I suspect describing Eve as a "large kindness" would earn me a clip around the ear'ole.

I stay up late into the wee hours, probably totally bugging up my sleep/wake schedule, and the next day or so passes in

quiet laziness with one interlude of quiet labor. At some point on Wednesday John sticks his head around the door on the way to the coffee and sez “You got any plans for the next couple of days?”, adding the caveat “Be careful how you answer”. It transpires that the vegetable garden needs digging over, and as I have nothing better to do and am in fact rather happy to engage in some physical work, the following day finds me with a different kind of fork in hand fighting bindweed roots. I am “singing for my supper”, Eve happily remarks, an observation that causes me to reflect that my singing voice (which should not be judged by past performances of *The Booze Brothers*, by the way) is woefully out of practice.

Friday morning’s writing done, I shower and make myself suitably presentable for a trip to the farm, having called to make sure there’d be someone there. Jean has some shopping to do, but I point out I won’t be there till 3 or so, by which time she’ll almost certainly be back, and Harvey will be there all day anyway. Having studiously researched buses in a Claire-like fashion, I determine that I will of course just miss one at Hitchin, giving me 45 minutes or so to kill before the next, so I hie me to the Nightingale again, and there I find Mike, an old friend from my Hitchin days. I bring him up to date, more or less, and we fall into reminiscence of how we met, being, as Mike described it, “the only bearded blokes with a book” in the pub, his taste also running to sf. I’m mildly surprised to have found him in the Nightingale, since the George was our more regular stamping ground in those days, although that now seems to cater to a much younger crowd. The George itself, just off the old Market Square, is unusually named, not for the English King you might expect, but for

George Washington, whose secretary was apparently a Hitchin man!



Leaving Mike to his current reading and taking mine (Harry Turtledove), I return to the station forecourt to await a bus which has no intention of arriving. Giving up on it a little after 3, I resign myself to a taxi, which duly deposits me at Elm Dene farm for a mere four times what the bus would have cost.

At the distance I’m now writing (there are almost four months between the completion of the previous paragraph and the start of this one), it wouldn’t be at all surprising that I’m short on details of my Friday afternoon visit to Harvey and Jean. We spent some time in happy reminiscence of my mum, sharing stories and quirks and generally having a bit of a laugh, which I know mum would have liked in her wry way, pretending to disapprove the whole time, intimating that we should of course be cloaked in solemnity rather than “talking daft”. Jean still makes a great cup of tea, and a great cup of tea has always been conducive to a correct sociability. We were warming to a level above mere pleasantry, when it dawned on me.

“Listen”, I said, “I really have to thank you for everything you’ve done. It was all so well organized, I don’t think anyone could

have done it better." Jean's face lit up like Christmas in Las Vegas. "Do you really think so?", she said. "Oh, no doubt about it, *no-one* could have done a better job", I said, and meaning it. "All the things you've done for mum these last years have been fantastic."

That was the golden moment. I'm not always too good at realizing what other people are looking for emotionally (especially what they're looking for from me, as I'm sure BB will attest), but at that point it was a useful visit to the Department of the Blindingly Fucking Obvious. All the crap about cousin Sheila before the funeral, the bad debt payoff, me being 3000 miles away, and despite the fact they knew at the time (which I didn't) that they were getting the biggest share of the legacy, they (and Jean in particular I think) just wanted to be *thanked*, wanted someone to realize, recognize and appreciate all they'd been doing.

Happy smiling faces all around, I take my leave to wait for the bus back to Hitchin, a beer and a train.

The rest is something of a blur from this distance. I know I got back to the Sign of the Scalded Scrotum, got packed and away back down to Croydon for one last Sunday night social, and this time curry on me since I'd managed to hit up Harvey for some useful dosh, which since he doesn't seem to work in units of less than £500, was well useful indeed.

Up at sparrow fart to get a bus to the airport which would have worked well except I just *barely* made the flight and had no time for shopping as I'd planned. Back to Maryland, back to work and debts and loans and to wait for the will, which I

had been told would be all sorted in "three of four weeks" (a lie).

Back to normal for a while.

Postscript

The details of the legacy finally became known in January. I was left £100,000, which translated into \$193,000 after transfer.

When the other bequests were taken into account, Harvey and Jean probably ended up with £300,000 or so. Nevertheless, I repaid Harvey the money he'd given me, the right thing to do in my opinion.

Although I do have a pension due (at 65 or later) from 12 years contributions at Scholl(UK), I pretty much sit here at 50 years old with no health insurance, no IRA and no savings, other than the money in the bank. I shall embark on a 5 to 10 year plan involving a move to Tennessee and go into business as a house builder.

The home office has been fully upgraded, I am ordering study books for my Tennessee Contractor's License exams, and last but not least will likely be a property owner by the time you read this, having put in an offer on 8½ acres in Greene County, which I hope to subdivide and build on.

Ask me about this here new iMac. It's fuckin' brilliant!