

NEVER
QUITE
ARRIVING

MADISON

SCARBOROUGH



NEVER QUITE ARRIVING

...is a delayed personalzine from Christina Lake of 47 Wessex Avenue, Horfield, Bristol BS7 0DE, about the 1993 Corflu in Madison and Mexican 5 in Scarborough. I suspect that after Simon Ounsley's exhaustive coverage in Lagoon 5, the last thing that the world needs is another Mexican report, but such is life. Feel free to skip it. The Madison part of this epic took so long to write that the Mexican section is mercifully brief. My Amstrad PCW also had strong views about the length of the Corflu report and swallowed a large chunk of it in an impromptu attempt to get me to edit. Sadly, for posterity, there are rescue services that can circumvent such tactics (at a price) and the text has been restored in all its rambling vastness. It did bring me one sentence that I still treasure, which read: "Without my usual support group of Lilian and Peter Fred I would have to make the effort of finding 9 people to go out to dinner with." Lilian and Peter-Fred probably never realised they were so valuable as dinner companions!

How It All Began

I don't normally go to conventions on two consecutive weekends. I'm far too indolent and impoverished to contemplate such practices, leaving them to the likes of Paul Dörmer who last year managed a Novacon, followed, I think, by a convention somewhere in Germany, or Bridget Wilkinson, whose traditional berucksacked form I have taken on many occasions to indicate that she is about to rush off to Eastern Europe as soon as the closing ceremony is over to collect another batch of Romanians or join in a jolly camp on the banks of the Dnieper. Still, the Corflu/Mexicon double had a certain appeal which, with the added bonus that this year's Corflu was being held in Madison, left my common sense fighting a losing battle with my conviction that it would be a GOOD THING. There's always been a connection between Corflu and Mexican, if only because they both came out of the fanzine fandom of the early '80s: Corflu born in Berkeley, California, 1984 from a perceived need for a convention where the fanzine fan would be the dominant species and Mexican in Newcastle, England in 1984 arising out of the desire to run a convention that reflected some of the interests of the British fanzine crowd, such as literate sf for the intelligent reader. Over the succeeding nine years, albeit on a biannual basis in the case of Mexican, the two conventions have evolved into respected institutions on both sides of the Atlantic. I've been to all the Mexicons, but despite my best intentions, had so far not made it to Corflu. So, what better opportunity to compare the reality of these two events, I thought in the first rush of enthusiasms (forgetting such factors as jet lag, money and clean clothes), than to attend them back to back?

Wednesday 19th May: Streetwise in Chicago

After two and a half weeks spent in Florida, the Bahamas and Texas (well, it was meant to be my holiday for the year), I should have been feeling good by the time I reached Chicago. Instead I just felt cold. And flaky. Friends don't often accuse me of being flaky these days. Underinformed, perhaps, and irrational, but not precisely flaky. But then they're talking about my personality, not my skin. After a week and a half of carefully controlled exposure to the sun, my vigilance lapsed one day, and I got burnt. The kind of pain that makes you want to stay immersed in a swimming pool forever, was followed by a few compliments on my suntan, and then, inevitably the beginning of the big peel: shoulders Texas, left arm Chicago, right arm Madison, flaking skin everywhere. I probably scattered more dead cells round America than will be left to spread on a rose bush when I die. So it's not surprising that by the time I met my host, the newly migrated and married Nigel Rowe, on a train platform in downtown Chicago, I felt like half the person I should have been.

There were other factors too. "I got stopped by narcotics at Houston airport all because of your bloody tea bags" I informed him, belligerently. Nigel had given me a shopping list of UK consumables to bring over, including PG Tips, which I had been dutifully dragging around America for the past two and a half weeks, so it was no wonder the sniffer dogs had finally got onto them. Well, it was them or the two weeks of dirty washing in my suitcase, but I preferred not to dwell on the latter. Nigel led me outside, then abandoned me on a street corner, informing me cheerfully that he just off to get some drugs. If narcotics had been following me since Houston then Nigel was in trouble. Alternatively they might have assumed, like me, that it was some perfectly legal over the counter transaction. Whatever, Nigel returned unscathed in time to join me on the street corner, and keep an informed eye open for his wife, Karen Babich, who was due to pick us up.

Karen turned up not long after with the world traveller version of Martin Smith ~~crossed~~ into the front seat of her car. Martin seemed to be in the grip of baseball frenzy, an affliction quite common among British aficionados of the sport once they hit American soil. He had already been to see two or three games, bought the shirts, bought the caps, tried to buy the glove and suddenly found that book shops could be interesting when it was pointed out to him that there was a sports section. But what did all this have to do with getting laid? I asked myself.

Finally, when Martin finished deliberating over how many tomes he could possibly carry home, we were able to leave the bookshop and go on to the microbrewery in the same complex. The place looked and felt quite like a traditional British pub, notwithstanding the fact that instead of going to the bar a waiter came round to take your orders from the drinks menu. For those unable to chose between the beers on offer, despite the lovingly written descriptions (which is certainly more than you get in a British pub before ~~embarking~~ on Old Dogs Collar or whatever), you could get a tasting set of all six, which in fact Nigel did, and sample them all. Nigel's option was definitely the best value for money, but somehow six glasses neatly arranged on a paper mat does not have the comfort value of one large glass of something you really like (which by good luck my choice was) which you can settle back into and drink without risk of knocking over the remaining five flavours. Karen had pleasant beer called a Maibock, which by the end of that weekend seemed so ubiquitous that I was beginning to believe it was a staple of American brewing until someone pointed out that these microbrewery beers were seasonal and a Maibock as its name implied was of course a May brew.

After some food and helping Nigel drink up his six glasses of beer (and Karen her one), we went on to another attraction of the complex, the Art Golf which was a crazy golf course constructed and painted by artists, featuring objet trouvés, skeletons, a liquor store, neon lights, a wheel of fortune, ladies and gents toilets (of less than equal difficulty as I proved by getting a hole in one from the ladies. Karen's preference to disrupt sex roles and use the gents did her no favours) and many more amazing constructions. Walking round admiring the concepts and execution was almost as much fun as the actual golf. At the end of the course was a map of the world with pins marking customers place of origin. Nigel, of course, being from New Zealand had to put a pin in for his native land, so I decided to mark Bristol for posterity too. Martin declined to participate, muttering some excuse about not being able to find Croydon on the map, as if he were ashamed of his home town or something.

Thursday 20th May : Eat Pretzel or Die!

The next day, as luck would have it, Nigel had to go to work. It was one of his first jobs since getting his green card, so despite the bad timing, he didn't really want to turn it down. Karen was going to drive us all up to Madison for the convention as soon as he had finished. At least that was the plan as it stood when Martin and I retired, chastely, to our twin sofas in Karen and Nigel's attic (despite making myself unpopular on my first view of the place

by shouting out, "Martin, you're smoking in my bedroom!") but, by the time we emerged the next morning, Karen said Nigel's knee was playing him up, so he had decided to come up to the convention the next day on the bus. This meant that we could now leave mid-afternoon to get there in time for the pre-convention meal, and I could stop worrying about whether I would be in time to meet up with Lorelei Manney who was going to be my room mate at the convention, and had offered to put me up for the night.

Karen had a lot of washing to sort out, so Martin and I went to have breakfast at a nearby eatery, then wandered round the streets as far as the lake until it began to rain and Martin got fed up with me whinging on about how cold it was ("Why isn't it 90° here? How can it be so cold? Is it this cold back in England? Could anyone lend me a pair of gloves please?") I decided that I wasn't equipped to venture downtown to explore the cityscape of ageing high-rise blocks that I had seen on my subway ride from the airport, but did wish I could remember enough about the Sara Paretsky books to do a V I Warszawski city crawl.

When we returned, Karen was out at the laundrette, so Martin felt impelled to demonstrate the truth of the song by flicking through all the channels on the cable repeatedly to prove that there was nothing on, while I read Karen's Turboapas, trying to get a handle on Madison fandom in preparation for the big event. As Lillian (Edwards) is on the waitlist for the Turbo Charge Party Animal Apa (possibly my favourite apa name of all times), I have seen copies before. I even witnessed Lynne Ann Morse meet fellow Turbo member Owen in a London pub for the first time. All the same, any apa full of stuff by people you haven't read or met is bound to be bewildering, but as a follow-up to my holiday reading of Spent Brass, Trap Door and Mainstream, it gave me a few hooks to hang names on and an idea of which people to look out for (often, admittedly, a false idea eg Nevenah sounded absolutely terrifying in print, but was great in person.) Finally Karen finished her chores, Martin and I loaded our luggage into the car, with enough difficulty to suggest that we might not have fitted in Nigel and his luggage as well, and we were on our way to Corflu at last.

The route was mainly freeway, and not very scenic, though Martin did his best for us by trying to look for non-English features to the journey, and by buying a Macdonalds hamburger for the purposes of comparison with its feeble English counterpart (or so he claimed). We made it into Madison at just after half six in the evening, and left the car to be parked by the hotel staff (an alarming practice I always find, but I suppose they can't really run off with all the cars put in their care), while Karen looked round for signs of the party of people supposed to be assembling to go to the restaurant, and Martin checked into his room. I simply stood there, feeling nervous, suddenly not sure if I wanted to meet all these strangers I'd read about, and even less sure if I wanted to see the people I was actually supposed to know. Just to prove this point, Jeanne Gommoll whom I'd met on my last trip to the States in 1988 and knew fairly well from our overlapping TAFF administrations came into view, accompanied by a man whom I rightly assumed to be her partner, Scott Custis. Karen went over to talk to them while I hung back not sure if I wanted to be recognised. After a bit, curiosity got the better of me, I took a deep breath, put on my best smile and went over to join them. Fortunately, Jeanne did remember me, and I quickly realised there was nothing to it after all. Jeanne and Scott said that everyone had gone on over to the restaurant, and that they were about to go and would take us in their car, providing we didn't mind sharing with the cow. Cow? I wondered. We soon saw what they meant, it was a plastic inflated cow that took up a large part of the back seat. Wisconsin, they explained, is cow country, famous for its dairy products and cheese, so naturally a Corflu held in Madison needed its own cow. (The Wisconsin state motto is something anodyne like the dairy state, but, apparently, a move to change it to "Eat cheese or die!" was only narrowly defeated!)

The restaurant, a German place called the Essen Haus, already had one table filled with assorted fans, among whom I only recognised Spike Parsons and Bill Bodden, although someone pointed out Steve Swartz whom I'd corresponded with by E-mail in advance of the convention. People waved in a friendly fashion, but did

not seem very excited to see me. After all, I wasn't on a TAFF trip any more, and hadn't even done much by way of fanzines in the last few years, so I could hardly expect celebrity treatment. People hugged each other in the way that British fans don't (well, some do, but not quite so universally as in American fandom) and I hung round the fringes wondering when my group would admit there was no room on the existing table and sit down on the next one. Eventually some of us did, and our table gradually filled with new arrivals, much to the confusion of the waitress, who didn't know whether to take our orders or run for cover. She compromised by bringing beer and pretzels. One of my neighbours Kate Schaefer confessed to being unprepared for the climate shift from the relative warmth of West Coast Seattle. At last, someone to agree with me on the cold! Opposite me, eight year old Ariel, daughter of committee members Ellen Franklin and Jim Hudson, kept threatening to die if the food did not arrive within five minutes. A man came over and hugged me (at last, someone pleased to see me!), expressing surprise at my presence. Of course I was pleased to be welcomed, but who was this man? A second look told me that it was Moshe Feder and he had grown a beard!

Programme sheets were passed round, which was where I discovered that contrary to my expectations, Corflu did not have a very high level of programming. Apart from a bookstore crawl there was nothing happening on Friday till the opening ceremony at eight in the evening, the Saturday programme consisted basically of four items in the afternoon and an auction in the evening, while Sunday was taken up by Sunday brunch and the softball game. I guess my single experience of Ditto, another American fanzine convention in the Corflu would had led me to expect a heavier programme, but as I was to discover later, this Corflu was actually considered by regular attendees as rather highly programmed. The previous Corflu in Los Angeles apparently had had no official programme at all!

Eventually our table was considered sufficiently finished for the staff to take our order. This was when we discovered that Madison fandom had only practised drinking at the Essen Haus, and had no recommendations to offer when it came to food. We did our best, but no-one was quite sure about the results. Ribs arrived in shockingly large portions. Sauerkraut dominated otherwise innocuous dishes. Starters outshone main courses. Art Widner found so many leftovers on the table when he arrived that he didn't need to order at all (though he gamely plumped for a starter to keep the staff happy). It was when it came to paying that the restaurant proved its true mettle. They might not serve the world's best German sausages, but any restaurant that can provide separate bills for something like thirty different customers deserves an award in my books.

So, bills settled with the minimum of fuss, we set out for the bowling. Karen had managed to secure me a lift with hospitality suite organiser Tracy Shannon, mainly on the grounds that Tracy was already transporting Bill Bodden who like me was due to stay overnight at Lorelei's, and unlike me, actually knew where she lived. Better keep that man in sight, I decided. Keeping Bill in sight turned out to involve going round to Steve Swartz's house to collect a bowling ball. I sat outside in the car with Tracy as she deemed that Steve's non fannish partner Elk wouldn't appreciate us all barging in on her. Karen, who is such a nice person that she is probably too rarely unwelcome to worry, ignored Tracy's dissuasion and went in too. I felt that the whole business of Steve Swartz's relationships were too steeped in history for me to even ask about them. Steve was spending the weekend quite openly with Seattle fan Jane Hawkins while Elk stayed at home and Bill collected the bowling ball. Not knowing the characters involved at first hand, as I usually do in British fandom, I didn't know how the situation worked, if it upset people and who it was safe to ask about it. I really needed a transatlantic hot line through to Pam Wells to get up to speed on the subject. Instead I talked to Tracy innocuously about the climate and how much snow they get in Madison. Tracy seemed proud of it. Life wouldn't be the same without the annual snows, she assured me. It sounded like the right

attitude for living in a place like Madison, where apparently the lake freezes over so hard that you can cycle across it in the winter.

The bowling alley was actually in one of the student's union buildings of the University of Wisconsin (in complete contrast to Bristol where you have to go to an 'entertainment centre' and play surrounded by slot machines and gangs of small boys queuing up for laser tag!). By the time we arrived, various games were already in progress. Karen and I went to hire shoes. Once kitted out, we found that there was a lane free for us, but no one left to play as Bill had gone in with the group on the next lane, and Tracy wasn't playing. So we started on a two person game, which resulted in us speeding through the rounds at two to three times the rate of the other lanes, pitilessly exposing my poor bowling technique to the critical attention of the more leisurely players in the adjoining lane. I was so bad that everyone assumed, to my embarrassment, that I'd never played before, or even that in England we don't have bowling (oddly enough the same assumption was made when I went on a French work exchange I did a couple of years ago, and we were taken out bowling as a typical item of French culture). Luckily, after a few goes I began to get the hang of it again and the balls stopped veering into the gutter all the time, and I even managed to get a couple of "spares", boosting my score to an almost respectable level.

Meanwhile, the word went round that true novice Martin Smith was beating Steve Swartz much to Steve's annoyance. By the time I had leisure to observe, it looked like the balance was shifting. Every so often Steve would get a strike and we would see him beating his chest in triumph and making loud crowing noises. What a jerk, I thought. Long-legged Jane, Steve's lady for the weekend, bowled with a fluid grace that looked really professional, though I don't know what it did for her score. Martin's play was not so impressive. He told me later that he had been doing really well in the first game, but after a few beers, he had found, oddly enough, that his form deteriorated. Thus, once more, were English sporting hopes dashed!

Towards the end of our game Karen pointed out a woman with spiky fair hair, saying that she was Lorelei, whom I was meant to be staying with. This was comforting, as I wanted to make sure she was really expecting me. Also I was curious to meet her seeing as we would be room-mates for the convention. Lorelei, I quickly decided, was cool. It was exactly the word for her. She seemed very together in the way that neat, small-boned people often are, and I felt rather untidy by contrast in my flaking skin and SouWestercon T-shirt.

After a second game, Tracy suggested it was time to go. She was keen to finish with ferrying us around and get back home, but Karen had mysteriously disappeared. Lorelei had gone on home on foot, so I worked out that I needed Tracy to get me back to the hotel for my suitcase, Karen to access my suitcase, as it was in her car, and Bill to direct us over to Lorelei's. If Karen didn't show up soon, the whole scheme could fall apart. "She's probably on the phone to Nigel," Tracy surmised, going to scout around, but failing to see any sign of her. We mingled some more, until at last Karen reappeared. As Tracy whisked us away Karen explained that she had indeed been on the phone to Nigel, negotiating with him to bring her a spare bra as the current one kept slipping. "You trust him for that?" said Tracy admiringly. "My husband wouldn't know where to begin." "Oh I told him to bring them all," said Karen, nonchalantly, leaving me with a picture of Nigel Rowe struggling up to Madison with his bag stuffed full with lingerie like a travelling bra salesman.

Safe at Lorelei's I was given a whole wing of the house to myself (well, bedroom study and connecting corridor). I was glad to get to bed, worn out by the prolonged contact with so many strangers and slightly dispirited by my poor showing at the bowling. I hoped it wasn't an omen for my social success at the convention as a whole. I must have been worried, because I woke myself up in the middle of the night with a scream, and found I was sitting up in bed staring at the red display of a digital alarm clock. For a moment or two I didn't have the slightest idea where in the world I was.

Friday 21st May : Fanzines, Fish Fries and 101 Weird Things to do with Cheese

The next morning I resisted the temptation to use Lorelei's superb bath tub cum jacuzzi as the controls looked too complicated for someone like me who has trouble making a simple shower work. Downstairs Lorelei was making coffee and expressed the normal surprise that I could function without it. Her voice had a slow lilting drawl to it which had probably contributed to my initial impression of her being ultra-cool. She made me up some orange juice (which Americans seem to keep in concentrate form in the freezer and dilute when required. A lot nicer than long life packs from Sainsburys) and presented me with the most daunting breakfast pastry of the trip, an enormous cinnamon bun with cream in it. As a long term lover of cinnamon, I, of course ate it all. Lorelei diplomatically saved some of hers for her husband who had gone off to work earlier, while Bill, a late entrant in the field completed his with no trouble while I was still messing around with my last fork-full.

To distract attention from my struggles, I decided to quiz Lorelei and Bill about the dance programmed for that evening. I mean, I know all about British convention discos, from Nigel Richardson's seminal assertion that "Fans can't dance" through to people's discos, ceilidhs and sixties revivals. But what was the form in Madison? What music would they play? What did people wear? How did it all work? There hadn't been a dance, as far as I remembered, at Nolacon or Ditto, my two previous experiences of the genre "American con". "Well, we all dress up in formal evening wear," suggested Bill Bodden, flippantly. Lorelei, more usefully, said people were going to bring along a load of CDs and somebody, Andy Hooper's sister I think it was, would play tracks from them. In fact, said Lorelei, she was meant to be taking some CDs along, and I might as well have a look at her collection and pick some out while she was packing. This, I thought, as I confronted a large selection of CDs brought me back to my original question : What did American dance to? In the end, I picked out a few that people might conceivably be able to move around to, feeling confident only about Talking Heads, and left them out for Lorelei to discard or take as appropriate.

Around about half past twelve we went over to the hotel, checked in but were told that the room wouldn't be ready till two. So after handing in my suitcase and Lorelei's two bags and one blouse on a hanger at the luggage store, we went in search of the convention, wishing I hadn't left my pocket programme behind as a place mat at the Essen Haus the night before. We quickly found one set of people wearing badges, but worked out that they were someone else's convention, the sort where you have to wear business suits and carry folders. Retreating hastily, we went through a door leading to the pool, where I spotted Rob Hansen up on the next level, leaning on the balcony that overlooked the pool. I waved to him and we climbed up the stairs to a terrace area. There we found ourselves outside a hotel room where a couple of elderly men were blowing up cows to the accompaniment of various ribald comments. Yes, Scott and Jeanne's cow was going to have a family!

The hotel room was in fact the con suite which Tracy Shannon was in charge of organising. Lorelei soon got roped in to putting up decorations while I put out the coffee materials, washed some grapes, then made a minor niche for myself in the convention ecology by being the first to find the ice machine. As ice gopher I brought in plastic container-loads to supplement the huge bags of ice already in use in the mandatory bath tub filled with drinks which had so thrilled the early British explorers on their first contact with American fandom. In one of the PRs Tracy had said she was not going to overstock the con suite with food on the assumption that people would probably like to go out and sample the wide range of eating opportunities offered by Madison. If this was an understocked room, then I would be curious to see a normal one. Tracy's room seemed to have huge quantities of everything : cheeses, patés, German sausages, biscuits, savouries, fruit, soft drinks. I was also impressed by the way Tracy handled her volunteers. She never turned anyone away but kept finding little jobs people could do, however minor, so that we all could have the satisfaction of contributing.

Two o'clock came, and Lorelei and I finally took possession of our room. By the time I'd settled in, it was not long till the first item on the programme, Steve Swartz's bookstore crawl. On consideration, I decided to give it a miss and just wander round by myself. It seemed a long time since I'd been let out on my own. In Texas everything had been too spread out to do without a car, and in Chicago there hadn't been much time for exploring. But in Madison the hotel was right in the centre, opposite the domed capitol building, and not far from the shops and the sun was shining. I felt a real sense of freedom setting out by myself (despite being beeped at by a mystery woman in a car, later revealed to be Nevenah Smith!). I looked round the library, then did some window shopping, including the Wisconsin cheese head souvenir shop, which featured cartoons on T-shirts and posters where the joke was that all the natives of Wisconsin had heads shaped like wedges of cheese. Very bizarre. Still, it was just as well I took time out to read some of the cartoons as a basic understanding of this ethos was to be essential to my understanding of later events at the convention.

Further along the street, I spotted a group containing Steve Swartz and Spike Parsons, congregated outside a pet shop. "I thought you were supposed to be looking at books," I accused as they cooed over the baby kittens. "Oh no, we're just wandering round the streets a bit," Spike denied. All the same, after walking along with them for a block or two, Steve led us into a second hand bookshop, which he claimed was one of the best in Madison, miles better than the one near the hotel, he added disparagingly. It was certainly large and well stocked, and deciding that maybe Steve wasn't such a jerk after all, asked him for ideas for a book to read on the plane home. He made one or two good suggestions which of course we couldn't find among the books actually there so I continued to browse while the others were gathered together to carry on their intrepid way to, I think, a coffee shop. Eventually I found a copy of Lonesome Dove which Sherry Coldsmith had recommended to me earlier in Texas, and bought that.

Back at the hotel, I realised that I'd better go and hang out at the con suite or I'd be liable to miss out on what I remembered from my previous experience of American cons as the six o'clock dinner exodus. Without my usual support group of Lilian and Peter Fred I would have to make the unaccustomed effort of actively finding people to go out to dinner with, or else it'd be a solitary burger for me in MacDonaldis. The terrace bar area with its large round tables was looking quite occupied. Also the registration desk was now in place, so there wasn't any excuse to delay shelling out a few of my remaining dollars for convention membership. Once joined up, I then felt obliged to decorate my badge, a piece of card with a cow on it, using the felt tip pens and stickers left on a nearby table for this purpose. Martin Smith at this stage was still simply Martin Smith, England, but soon, struck by inspiration (I'm not sure whose) he annotated that to Rob Hansen's Martin Smith, to emphasise his status as a character in Rob's fictional world. His excuse was that he and Rob had the perfect symbiotic partnership. Without Martin to make jokes about, Rob wouldn't have much to write about, and without Rob's pieces on him, nobody would know who Martin was. I suppose he had a point, but it seemed a high price in ridicule to pay for a bit of attention.

Mind you, seeing several people handing round fanzines, and none of them coming my way, I began to feel he had a point. It's been a long time since I've actually had to ask people for fanzines, and with nothing with me to trade, I began to feel rather left out of it all. Maybe I should have listened to Nigel Rowe who had been urging me to "Pub my ish" for the convention. But where was Nigel? Eventually I spotted Karen who told me that Nigel's knee was still playing him up, and that he had decided he wasn't coming to the convention after all. This seemed a bit drastic. How bad was this knee? Or was it shame at not having his fanzine out (or simply the prospect of carrying all of Karen's bras?)

As time went by, I noticed that there were less and less people on the terrace bar, and yet nobody seemed to be overtly making dinner arrangements. They were simply disappearing. Perhaps, I thought with growing paranoia, they had all made them earlier. Or perhaps no one wanted to eat with me. I toughed it

out a bit longer, till the place really did look dangerously empty, then decided that pride had its limits, and I would simply ask anyone in sight what they were doing about eating. So I went over to a group containing Martin Smith and Spike Parson, and asked them. "Friday is fish fry night," Spike's partner Tom Becker explained reassuringly. And I was in, as simple as that.

Tom certainly wasn't exaggerating. The fish fry restaurant, situated in a roomy converted railway booking hall was already full, and there was a substantial waiting list for tables as they came free. We passed the time till our turn by looking round a gift shop in a converted railway carriage (you begin to get the theme for this place), or in Martin's case, with taking a cigarette break with Julie Gomoll, the notoriously cool sister of the more famous Jeanne. When our table was called, we explained that we needed to be out in approximately three quarters of an hour which proved no problem despite the time expended in introductions, first by our drinks waiter then our food waiter. Most of us opted for the fish fry, which involved eating as much fish in batter, fries and coleslaw as you want. Even Martin who subsequently admitted to not really liking fish. "All you can eat" and rushing back for an opening ceremony are not entirely compatible concepts, but by the second plate of fish we (those of us that liked fish) were flagging anyway, apart from Tom and Terry Garey who were talking so intently about books that Spike was worried that Terry might be in need of rescue, though she seemed to be loving it.

The opening ceremony was apparently going to involve a play, so Spike thought that all of us not chosen to be in it should perform a fannish version of A Midsummer Night's Dream instead, preferably involving a pyramid. At this point in the convention I didn't know about Spike's interest in human pyramids, so I couldn't quite understand why she was appraising Martin so carefully.

Eventually even the literary discussion corner of the party declared themselves fished out and we settled the check with minimum hassle, but not quite quickly enough to escape the spectacle of the waiters being summoned to a table to sing a harmonised version of "Happy Birthday", as if they were being trained up to become the BeeGees.

Spike's information proved correct, and the opening ceremony really did take the form of a play not the serious sort of dramatic work that has become the hallmark of Mexicans, but a - gasp - fannish play! This was read rather than performed since most of the cast had only had the last hour in which to practice (so that's why no-one was going out to dinner!) and besides there wasn't much space left for action once you'd crowded 15+ people on to the podium. The cast consisted mainly of committee members, guests and luminaries such as Ted White and Moshe Feder. The plot I quickly recognised as bearing some resemblance to a fannish story by Andy Hooper that I had not had enough interest to finish reading in Spent Brass. I enjoy fanzines for what they tell me about real people but have never had much interest in fan fictions (despite, I suppose, being guilty of writing one myself once for a programme book). I've never even had the slightest desire to read the Enchanted Duplicator and any mention of Jophan and his ilk leave me cold. I guess it's just not my culture. Nevertheless, fleshed out with real voices and audience reaction, the story of a fan saved from gaffiation by his fannish guardian angel was a jollier start to a convention than most opening ceremonies, and received an enthusiastic response from the audience. As Rob Hansen said later, it simply wouldn't work at a British convention - we're all too cynical. But it went down a storm in Madison.

In high spirits, the ceremony continued with presentations to the guests. Toastmaster David Hartwell, renowned for his sartorial brightness, was given a yellow tie with holes in it to simulate a long thin piece of cheese. It was with some disappointment that people noted that the new tie matched his outfit even better than the original (displaced to go in to the auction). I can't remember what Madison monstrosity special guest Bob Tucker was landed with though I suspect it may have been a propellor beanie. Tucker who was an irascible gray haired man in his sixties, just chuckled, no doubt hoping the committee would get him a bottle of his favourite Jim Bean too (which they did). Then came the moment, hallowed in fannish legend ever since Pascal Thomas's name was picked

out at the first Corflu, the selection of guest of honour by lot from all the members attending. Since the guest has to make a speech at the convention banquet (or in this case, brunch), I was keeping my fingers crossed that it wouldn't be me. The odds were in my favour, but even so I felt a sense of relief when they announced the name of Jae Leslie Adams, a Madison fan whose contribution I had read with interest in the Turbo Apa only the day before. Jae was called up on to the stage and given two large packages (well, maybe this guest of honour lark's not so bad, I thought, fleetingly envious now the danger was past!). Looking rather overwhelmed, Jae opened them as instructed to find a cheese-head shirt and a "Big Cheese" hat, which was a wedge of spongy material in the shape of a cheese (boy, would I have looked stupid wearing that back on the plane), and was sent away to write her speech.

The next event of the evening was the dance - which turned out to be so like a British convention disco I might as well have not wasted my time on speculation. The only difference was they didn't play "Tainted Love" and hardly anyone was wearing black. Where the women of British fandom have embraced black lycra, lace and leather wholesale, the Americans still seemed to like wearing loose fitting bright colours, with the honourable exception of Vijay Bowen, who wore a swirling black fish net skirt over fish net stockings and a flesh coloured top. The only mystery about Vijay's outfits was that despite being the most stylish person present she seemed to spend all her time flirting with Rob Hansen. Julie Gommoll caused a stir by changing into shorts, so I decided to do the same, coming back to some applause in my lycra cycle shorts. Suddenly I began to feel more at home. There's nothing like dancing in a group to the same music for a bit of bonding, and as it was a small convention, the people on the dance floor all knew each other and weren't shy to dance. There was none of the customary hanging around waiting for the disco to get going, where everyone you know skulks in the shadows at the edge, watching some extrovert Goths that you've never seen in your life, probably a job lot down from Manchester, having a great time, while the rest of your friends are elsewhere implying that it's in some way uncool to go to the disco before midnight.

Then just when we were getting into it, it was time to go along to the day's one panel, scheduled for the unlikely time of 10pm, to hear the "TAFF/DUFF stories they couldn't tell". This was Jeannie Bowmann's brainchild, intended to give people the chance to tell all the "real" stories that were too scandalous to write, though by the time I caught up with her she was having second thoughts about it, not helped by my suggestion that the untold stories theme could also be interpreted as those experiences too boring for the report, like long hours on the train or the evenings spent in catching up on the trip report notes. Jeannie kicked off with her own version of that genre favourite, the Martin Smith story, a retelling of one of Rob's anecdotes which she'd heard on her trip, relating inevitably to Martin's gross failure to score with some woman who had invited him back to her room for a back rub. With impeccable timing, Martin wandered in just as she had finished, to a great deal of laughter which he stoically accepted as his due. Jerry Kaufmann told a Harlan Ellison story. Rob Hansen, outdone in the Martin Smith stakes, reluctantly resorted to making up fiction about himself.

Then Jeannie started casting around for anyone else who'd been on TAFF or DUFF trips and I tried desperately to think of anything scandalous I'd done on my TAFF trip (or anything I'd done at all!). I used to have a David Brin story about him trying to impress some kid on the plane on the way back with his "rocket ship", but I'd forgotten the details. Or I could have made capital out of Lillian and told all the awful things I'd had to put up with from her on our joint trip, except that she'd put up with just as much from me and I didn't really want to do that just for a cheap laugh. In the end I inarticulately resorted to the banal. "Why did you prefer Seattle to San Francisco?" Jeannie asked me. "Well, it was sunny and there were lots of places to swim." (Hey, what an insight, give this woman another award!).

Exposed as the fake I was, I went back to the disco in time to see them wheeling the bar away. "Hey, they're wheeling the bar away!" screamed Martin

Smith, who looked like he was contemplating throwing his body in its path. It was only eleven o'clock, but the desertion of the dance for the panel had dealt a death blow of neglect and the staff had given up. Nobody else seemed to care. "They just won't believe this back home," said Martin morosely. Not only was there no bar at the dance, but the bath tub upstairs in the Hospitality Suite was stacked only with soft drinks. I began to see why the Brits had a reputation as heavy drinkers among American fans. The people at Corflu seemed to find it quite normal to pass the evening with no alcohol at all. It certainly didn't seem to dampen the mood of the dance. Rob was out there boogieing with Vijay, Julia was unstoppable, Jane was as good on the dance floor as she'd been at the bowling alley and Lorelei was as cool as ever. Even the cows joined in.

Some time before the close of play, Carrie Root mentioned that she really felt like a swim. I immediately concurred. I'd been looking longingly at that pool all day, but hadn't had the nerve simply to go swimming by myself under the cynical eye of the throng in the Hospitality Suite. Also, like her, I thought it'd be the perfect way to cool down after the dance.

So as the disco closed, and people drifted back to the con suite for the promised Midnight Cheese Orgy, Carrie and I donned our swim suits, grabbed some cheese cake and took to the waters. The cows, inevitably, had beaten us to it and were lined up standing on the water in surreal fashion. We swam around with them a bit, before returning them to their vigil on the water meadow.

Upstairs, after the swim, Karen, Tracy and Jeanne were still in the cheesecake business, professing surprise that there was still some left, as if even a fannish appetite would get through fifteen cheesecakes in five minutes. Eventually I began to ooze too much water so I decided to go and change. Back in my room, Lorelei was already preparing for bed, as I realised that was all I really wanted to do too. Out of curiosity I asked Lorelei what she had made of the play earlier, thinking that she might have been a bit bewildered by some of the fannish references. "Oh yes," she said, obviously misinterpreting my doubtfulness, "Of course you'd have found it rather confusing. You see it's all based on this American film, "A Wonderful Life" I nodded and admitted I'd never seen the film. So much for playing the condescending expert to my neo friend!

Saturday May 21st : The Fannish Renaissance and Other Unlikely Innuendos

The morning's programme consisted of precisely one item 6am to noon : The Farmers' Market. (Six a.m. start not mandatory.) This was a large produce oriented market in the Capitol Square just outside the hotel. Not having read Olivia Picklejar's (aka Ariel) guide to the market at the time, I did what the rest of the crowd dictated : an anti-clockwise circuit of the stalls (stifling anarchic tendencies to meander against the flow). Breakfast was easy to pick up, a cinnamon stick (didn't the 1966 World Cup squad sing about that?) narrowly winning out over home-baked loaves, pastries, cakes and muffins. I was tempted by them all, but recognised my limitations. More so still with the rest of the produce - jams, maple syrup, home-grown veg, cheese, plants - all of which wouldn't get past customs in a hurry.

Back at the hotel, a hefty day - well afternoon of programme loomed ahead of those who made it back from the market. First *Do Fans Grow up into Pros?*, featuring David Hartwell, Moshe Feder, Ted White and Bob Tucker. In Britain this sort of item would have been peopled with fiction writing wannabes and would have talked incessantly about Interzone. In this discussion the emphasis was more on the editorial side of publishing : Moshe's guilt about working in a field where other people were fans of the subject matter he published, Ted White on how he remained a fan in terms of enthusiasm when he does his professional work (to the extent of wanting to "Tuckerise" his works by putting in the names of fans for his characters), David Hartmann on how collecting SF took him into publishing and Tucker on those fans that made it as pros then reneged on their fannish past. This inevitably led to a discussion of SFWA in all its glory. Throughout, panellists and audience maintained a healthy scepticism about the whole mystique of being on the publishing/ professional side of the fence. Well, it was a fanzine fan convention.

When asked how many of the audience didn't have any ambition to write professionally, large numbers raised their hands. This simply would not be true in British fandom where so much of the activity revolves around the writing or publishing sets, and where even what's left of fanzine fandom is riddled with ambition to write professionally (e.g. Simon Polley, Simon Ounsley, Judith Kanna, me). But of course, as David Hartmann pointed out to in the post-panel discussion in the hospitality suite, Corflu is not representative of American fandom as a whole. The would-be writers hang around Mike Resnick, not fanzine fandom. Debbie Notkin then went on to describe how to be really 'in' as a writer you had to hang out on a certain section of the net, and to vigorously debate whether this clique had any real power or if people simply discounted their anthologies because they knew the selection was biased. As a non E-mail subscriber with an awareness already that I was missing out, I could only sympathise with people's disquiet at the situation, whilst at the same time being strongly reminded of the Milford anthology syndrome (back in the days before Midnight Rose).

By the time I got back to the programme again the quiz (Shaunish Trivia) was in its final phases. The large bulky form of Andy Hooper, quiz-master extraordinaire, in his baseball cap, was looming over the contestants (two teams comprising in some combination Moshe, Rob Hansen, Ted White, Tucker etc), bludgeoning them with questions like name the Fanoclast, who won the staples war (me, claimed Tucker) and what was the title of Jerry Kaufman's DUFF trip report. Rob Hansen nearly blew a gasket when the opposing team couldn't answer "Who edited Wrinkled Shrew?" ("Seminal work of British fandom. Should be ashamed to call themselves fans. Mutter, mutter!") Most of the questions didn't mean much to me, being American based. I don't know how much they meant to the audience, but attendance was high and participation intense. There was no doubting that this was a popular event. These fans felt proud of their heritage, not embarrassed. Or was it just the lack of alcohol in the hospitality suite? With no comfortable and tempting alternative to attending the programme, the programme - whatever it was - became the place to be?

Next up was the uninspiringly named "The Year in Fandom 1992", starring yet again, Moshe Feder and Ted White (I've heard of paying your dues, but these two must have had some pretty heavy karma to work off to be expected to appear on every panel!) and for a change Andy Hooper, Dick & Nicki Lynch and Leah Smith. This item, refreshingly from a British perspective, turned into something of a celebration of the fannish renaissance, particularly the Orlando Worldcon, where the presence of Walt and Madeleine Willis brought in the fanzine fan community and Dick & Nicki's Mimosa won the fanzine Hugo. Leah Smith, as if to prove that this talk of renaissances was no chimera proceeded to boggle the audience with an account of how many fanzines she shipped overseas (on a weight-related bulk permit).

Unaccountably the discussion became diverted on to Sharyn McCrumb's follow-up to *Bimbos of the Death Star*. In this book, her picture of the fan conforms to an image, popular among certain British fan-writers, as anal retentive, under-socialised, perpetual adolescents, and it was interesting to hear that she had got her raw material for the books by reading fanzines belonging to a neighbour who was a fan. "Hey," said Ted, mystified, "there was some good material in there. She should have known better." But apparently skimming the surface of weird sub-cults is all part of Sharyn's normal *modus operandi*.

The final panel for the day - and for the convention - was that old favourite of American fans, the mimeo panel (duplicator, to us). This, it has to be said, did a lot to clear the crowds out of the programme room. Those that remained were either the dedicated, the curious, or (in my case) those that get a kick out of hearing the Americans talk about twiltone paper. Was there a mill that still produced it? Who had beaten whom to buy the last consignment from the only warehouse in New York State that stocks it? And how many people used the shortage of twiltone as an excuse not to produce a fanzine? Personally, I hate the stuff. Touching it reminds me of sleeping on old nylon sheets. But I guess it's just one of those cultural gap things. Rob Hansen, bless him, wrenched matters back to the central issue - mimeo machines and their maintenance - in a hernia inducing tale of shifting non-functional duplicators between cellar and first floor (second, if you're American)

study, with only a cameo role for Martin Smith (he didn't even manage to throw up over them, let alone fail to have sex with them!). Since this was far too much like an anecdote and the serious mimeo dismemberment club were getting restive, Colin Hinz looking younger and even more enthusiastic than when I met him at Ditto in Toronto and definitely wearing the best shirt of the con was invited up on stage to talk about the dissection and cannibalisation of old duplicators. That kept the panel going to a respectable conclusion in which all present agreed that mimeos still represent value for money, and can be used with great success in conjunction with a modern DTP package and an electro-stenciller.

Programme over, I found I'd just missed the sensible time for swimming, meeting a dripping, but still cool Lorelei leaving the pool area. I'd also broken my tryst with young Ariel whom I'd promised to meet at the pool at five to watch her take on her official duties as pool programme organiser. But Ariel seemed to be having too much fun in the jacuzzi to care. On the way up to the con suite I met Nigel Rowe who had turned up after all, complete with one page fanzine. "What's on the programme?" he asked. "You've just missed it!" I explained. Nigel did not seem too upset.

This time I didn't have to sit out in the meat-market of the hospitality suite area to get a dinner date. In fact, I had the opposite problem - too many tempting offers. First Moshe asked me if I'd like to dine with him and Lise, then Jeanne Gomoll asked, and not taking no for an answer, decided to attempt to amalgamate her party with Moshe's, then Karen Babich started talking about barbecue with Sevenah and so which I had to decline or the whole convention might have ended up eating together again. Perhaps wearing my name badge had something to do with it. The day before I hadn't worn my badge to avoid getting holes in my shirt. That day I decided to give identification a try. Certainly the name badge helped a whole lot in getting hold of fanzines, and in simply meeting people. Geri Sullivan offered me a copy of Idea, which had seemed so tantalizingly unobtainable the day before, Barnaby Rappaport traded me Let's Fanac 4 from his vast output, and Ted White introduced me to Dan Steffan and gave me a copy of Blat. Suddenly I felt part of it all in a way that was reminiscent of my TAPP trip, and stopped worrying about whether people wanted to talk to me or not.

When the time came to go out to dinner, chaos reigned in the foyer. Moshe and Lise were late, then they informed us that they'd asked Jim Frenkel who not only wasn't there, but hadn't been counted in for the booking. In the meantime, Karen's party kept getting mixed up with ours, mainly because no-one really knew who was supposed to be eating with whom. Moshe stayed behind to wait for Jim whom, of course, we then met en route, and so forth. But in the end, everything worked out, as these things tend to do, and we were all seated at table, happily waiting for our food and listening to Ariel's familiar threat ("If the food doesn't come in five minutes, I'll die!"). Jeannie and Ellen down my end of the table talked child care and Worldcon committees, not necessarily separately, Lise stunned the whole room into silence with her expose of the plot of a recent gay musical, a resourceful waitress taught Ariel how to fold a napkin and the negotiations to get all the separate bills paid took almost as long as the meal itself.

In fact the financial transactions were so complex that we were taken into an adjoining bar area, where the staff read out the bills and Jeanne who was paying for various people who had dashed back for the auction kept saying things like "Did Julie have a starter?" and "Whose was the crab pate?" while someone else, like Lise would explain that it had been paid for already on another bill, and the barman would start adding it up all over again. It was at this point that I began to talk to Jim Frenkel, in between his attempts to obtain a receipt for his food (a repetitive process involving him naming some random amount that might approximate to his bill, the waitress or barman promising to see to it, then mysteriously turning up with a receipt for someone else!). The conversation as I recall was about Britain, then went on to lifestyles in general, during which Jim explained that his wife habitually stayed up to four in the morning to write. "Gosh, what dedication!" I said, impressed. "Sure, she takes it seriously," Jim agreed. He went on to explain that it was so important that sometimes she went off to Boston for a few weeks of uninterrupted writing time away from the children. I made suitable fellow-writerly

type noises. Then he mentioned that she was going to be guest at some convention and my brain kicked belatedly into play. This wasn't some aspiring amateur like me that he was talking about. "Umm, er," I said, "what's your wife's name, then. Maybe I've heard of her." "Joan Vinge," he said with obvious reluctance. Okay, only the person whose book I'd been recommended to buy the day before. Only the author of the award winning (I suppose?) Snow Queen. I felt that I should be feeling embarrassed - at this sort of convention you were probably meant to know, not have to ask, but I didn't feel too bad about it. I hadn't known, and was more excited to realise I was talking to Joan Vinge's husband, than phased by the naivety of my previous comments.

The big entertainment planned for Saturday night at the convention was - guess what? - not a disco (done that!), not a band, not an excruciatingly bad variety show, not a play, not a series of intellectual panels on changing the face of sf as we know it, but ta-ra! a fanzine auction. Not being a great fan of auctions, and remembering the absence of alcohol in the con suite the night before, I'd taken the precaution of buying in a bottle of wine. So before facing the auction I collected a consignment of ice from my pet ice machine (handy things) and poured myself a fortifying draft to take with me, hoping that my room mate wouldn't think the worst of me when she found an open bottle of wine sitting in the bathroom.

Auctioneering by this stage was in full flow, starring Andy Hooper and Jeannie Bowmann. I slipped into a seat at the side, finding myself in front of Martin Smith and Julie Gomoll who were looking suspiciously chummy. Didn't Martin know she was a lesbian? Or did he believe that the camaraderie of smokers could break down all barriers? Clearly so, as Martin let the auctioneers talk him into another set of condoms. Or maybe he just felt it incumbent upon himself to buy them in his role as Rob Hansen's Martin Smith. Meanwhile, Avedon Carol's Rob Hansen was entertaining the stunning Vijay again, but confining his bidding interests to old fanzines. Amy Thompson auctioned off her Virtual Girl T-shirt, limited edition advertising her forthcoming novel, to one or other of the lecherous old men in the audience. Dave Hartwell's tie went for a paltry sum, proving that it simply wasn't tasteless enough (the worse the tie, the easier the money, I learnt at one of my rare TAFF auction appearances, but that rule may only hold true for Britain). Lorelei outbid Jeanne for a copy of the Wasp Factory in Swedish with a weird inscription from Iain Banks. In between, I guess they sold off a few fanzines, but the only item that interested me was old copies of Turbo Apas which were snapped up by Julie Gomoll, maybe in an effort to take Martin's mind off condoms.

I reached the end of my glass of wine and decided that I couldn't stand much more of this level of excitement, so wandered off to the Hospitality Suite where not only had Scott Custis installed all his microbrewery beers but a select group of refugees from the auction were engaged in tasting them at least one hour ahead of schedule. There were four barrels, containing a Pilsner, a dark beer, the inevitable Maibock and, I think, a bitter. I started with the dark which I decided I rather liked, despite expert opinion that it had an unusual flavour. The Pilsner was good too, and the others pretty drinkable. It was relaxing just to stay there and talk to Scott and the steady stream of people dropping by to try one or other of the beers, picking up on the latest news from the auction ("It looks like it'll go on forever!") At some point, though, it must have ended, because Spike was there, rounding up people to practice for the human pyramid - she'd signed up Scott and Martin for the second layer, and the light lithe Lorelei for the top - and when I ventured out of the hospitality suite I saw that nearly the whole of the bar area had filled up. I wandered around, seeing who was there, and bizarrely finding myself in conversation with various American who had been at Helicon in Jersey, and being forced to confess that I hadn't gone. Obviously there'd been more to that convention than the Romanians after all! Scott came back from the pyramid rehearsal, and Jeanne soon began to tease him, telling him that Steve Swartz had been egging her on to go and tickle his balls while he was in position in the second layer of the pyramid. Jeanne seemed to think that Scott should exact some revenge on Steve for this suggestion, and enlisted my help with the proposal that we should lure Steve down to the swimming pool where Scott could then push him in. Scott for some reason would have nothing to do with this plan. "That woman's trouble!" he kept saying, fondly, of his

beloved. The night seemed to proceed in the same vein. Jeanne turned up sucking a large stick of candy, a demure expression on her face that Geri Sullivan immediately interpreted as highly suggestive. As Jeanne and Scott were on their way to bed at this point, her analysis seemed likely to be accurate. Geri then proceeded to hand round chocolate sticks for us all to suck, making such a lawd display with hers on her tongue that her delegated scribe for the evening looked quite worried and quickly asked if we could supply any quotes for Geri's con-report notebook. And this is the woman who wears Vince Clarke T-shirts on her chest. There must be more to this fifties fandom than I ever thought!

Sunday 23rd May : The Bridges of Madison City

The convention banquet remains more a concept than a reality in my world of fandom. Back when they still seriously 'did' banquets, I had no money. Now that I have just as little money but less sense about what I spend it on, conventions don't seem to have banquets any more, just accidental simultaneous invasions of the same restaurant. But in America, as with almost any tradition that we have managed to ditch with a sneer over here, the banquet is still going strong, and Corflu's version of it was the Sunday brunch. No kidding. We were meant to crawl out of bed with whatever level of hangover the microbrewery beers might have given us and indulge in festivities at eleven in the morning. Didn't the Americans invent the phrase "I'm not a morning person"? Or was that Lilian Edwards? Either way, I didn't fancy the chances of a socially dynamic occasion manifesting itself at that hour of convention Sunday. Still, ever willing to try a new thing in the cause of transatlantic relations (and besides it was part of my membership fee), I was up bright and early, in time to be enlisted into blowing up balloons and hanging them from the ceiling. The committee, looking sickeningly like morning people, had really gone to town on the decorations - there were streamers, balloons, cows (inevitably), place mats - everything but party hats (mercifully). I decided to forget my creaky early morning feelings and get in to the party mood. The crowd gathering outside looked less easy to win over. There was a certain zomboidal air familiar from countless convention breakfasts, normally denoting the coffee addict before his morning fix. I was also able to make another entry in my clothing etiquette book (female TAFP winners, for the use of) to the effect that the appropriate female attire for Sunday brunch was pretty frock or skirt (needless to say I was in leggings as usual, but of a concessionary pink colour to mark day-time wear).

Eventually the committee declared the brunch room sufficiently decorated for official consumption and let in the crowds. I sat down at one of the tables near the front with Lorelei and Spike and the person who does fanzine reviews for Spent Brass. As the tables began to fill, people milled round looking for seats with all the organisation of a herd of cows, while spaces were fiercely guarded for absent, presumed over-sleeping, friends. My front table turned out to be not as tactically sound for getting hold of food quickly as one might have hoped, as the order for going up to the breakfast buffet was the table next to us (committee & guest table) first, then all tables behind, before coming back to us. Thankfully the food didn't run out, and the only problem was as usual how to fit it all on the plate (actually, as I recall, we were allowed two plates, but that didn't entirely solve the problem). There were various salads, ham, pancakes, eggs, pastries - in fact the quintessential American breakfast, guaranteed to make you start the day as you mean to go on, with a coronary.

After we'd all eaten, the formal ceremonial part of the occasion began. Ted White elected a new past president for fwa (fan writers of America), a tradition no doubt steeped in parody of proceedings of such bodies as sfwa, but an honour nonetheless. Predictably, this honour went to special guest Tucker, who then made a speech. For a noted humourist of fandom, I thought his speech was only mildly amusing (his unforced asides on panels had been better), maybe because he was trying too hard to be funny. Jae Leslie, the randomly selected fan guest of honour, was very effective. As she explained afterwards, she's a lecturer, so when they picked her name out of the hat, she simply thought, that's all right, I can do this. And so she could. Standing at the podium, with the big cheese hat on her head, Jae Leslie spoke

engagingly about her contact with science fiction fandom, side-stepping any of the stereotypes to get to the essence, which for her was people who would engage in written debate as eagerly as she. Also in an instinctively fannish way she managed to bring her son and mother into the narrative so that by the end of the speech you had an impression of who Jae Leslie was as a person as well as her views on science fiction and fandom. I heard afterwards that Andy Hooper had snapped up a transcript of the speech for Spent Brass, and wasn't a bit surprised.

The grand finale to the brunch which I had temporarily forgotten in the rush of blood to my stomach until Lorelei turned up in the team jersey (the Corflu sweatshirt, featuring an ATom cartoon) was Spike's pyramid. Suddenly it was happening. Each team member ran in, announcing a number, then the location of the corresponding Corflu, then knelt in position, back steady to receive the weight of the next layer. All cameras were poised as Lorelei scrambled nimbly on to the very top of the pyramid and for a moment it all held. I realised that as usual I hadn't pulled back the lens cap on Peter Fred's camera, so my picture shows only the disintegrating pyramid, Lorelei already gone from the top.

Thereafter the brunch could only drift towards disintegration too. One of the inflatable cows was passed around for everyone to autograph. I went off to check on my financial position and decided that I probably could afford to buy the one piece of merchandising I really coveted - not the ATom sweatshirt, though I wouldn't have minded one, not the fanthology which I really *should* have bought, but the Tiptree Award cookbook "Her Smoke Rose Up for Supper" (sequel to *The Bakery Men Don't See*) featuring recipes from a large number of fans and pros. I wanted it partly because I like cookbooks, partly because it made an excellent souvenir to the convention as many of the people I met there were in it and partly because TWP were (still are?) planning to put out their own cookbook and this one looked so good that I wanted to take it home and show them (which, writing this on the train to Edinburgh where I'm hoping to see Jane Carneil, cookbook editor designate, I realise I've failed miserably to do!)

The afternoon's big event - or, as some might have it, the big event of the con - was the softball match. Bill Bodden versus Andy Hooper. I'd heard so much about this event ranging from Martin Smith's desperate search for a glove to accounts of the match in El Paso that I decided that I would have to go along and watch. People began to reappear in their baseball gear, some looking much as normal (like Andy Hooper whose baseball cap must be glued in place by now) and some looking unexpectedly sporty (Moshe, for example). I expected to see Martin Smith posing in one of his many trendy baseball shirts, but having spoken incessantly of the game for days, Martin inexplicably was nowhere to be seen. Meanwhile the team captains were gathered anxiously outside the hotel, inspecting the sky which looked distinctly threatening. All the same, no-one was prepared to admit the brutal truth that this was the kind of weather the English cricket team prayed for when facing another inning's defeat by Australia (yet still in the future), so a contingent of us, led by Steve Swartz set off for the pitch on foot, leaving the rest to argue over which cars to take.

The pitch - or diamond as the cognoscenti seem to call it - was a muddy piece of wasteground with a sagging wire fence, basic grass cover and some minimal baseball pitch markings. By the time we reached this uninspiring site it was just beginning to drizzle. Undeterred, Steve did some practice pitches to Jane, while Moshe thrust a camera into Lise's hand for her to commemorate the occasion on film. Lise asked if I would be spectating too. Definitely. No baseballglove, I explained happily, looking at the mud. I might not know much about softball, but was pretty confident that anyone without a glove would be excused. Besides I didn't know the rules.

As the rain became more persistent, another contingent of spectators arrived, Tracy and Lorelei, Jeanne Gomoll with various family members in tow, Hope Kiefer and her baby. Also Martin finally showed up, proudly displaying the new glove that Nevanah had whisked him away to buy. We joked that it was far too pristine to risk soiling in an actual game. Martin looked half-inclined to agree, but gamely went off to participate in the team selection which was going ahead in spite of the rain. Tracy put up her umbrella and offered me some space under it. Lorelei went back to

one of the cars along with Hope, the baby, Jeanne (who had suddenly decided not to play after all), Jeanne's brother and most of the rest of the spectators. Lise stayed out to look for photo opportunities. Tracy offered to explain the rules to me. I listened dutifully, though I rapidly worked out that the main rule was that Andy's team would go in and fail to make it round the diamond, Bill's team would take their turn, hit the ball a mile away and do a rounder (or a home run, as they call it). Change of innings was marked by Steve smooching with Jane from the opposing team. Tracy couldn't tell me what that corresponded to in pro baseball. In exchange for Tracy's expertise, I attempted to teach her the rules of cricket, which she seemed to want to know to help her read Dorothy Sayers novels.

In the mean time, Martin went in for his first bat (strike?) to the full vocal backing of the spectators. This was probably enough to guarantee that he would fail to connect with any of the allotted three pitches, which he did. Then next, Julie Gommoll came in and stood facing the pitcher with a cigarette dangling from her mouth like an athletic seaside landlady. Still it seemed to work and she was soon haring off towards first base. The pitch soon became so muddy that those fortunate enough to hit the ball had to cautiously pick their way across to the next base, or end up flat on the backs. This resulted in a lot of run-outs and even more muddy bums. I kept thinking of that mysterious phrase from my Peanuts reading days "Slide, Charlie Brown, slide!" Everyone slid - backwards, sideways, even into the spectators. The rain ran down the edge of Tracy's umbrella and dripped onto my back, gradually soaking through my jacket. All concerned were mightily relieved when after the fourth innings, Andy conceded the match 2 to 16 or thereabouts and we could take the team photos and go home. Lorelei emerged from the car to look critically at our sodden appearance and remark that she had had a lovely time playing with Hope's baby.

Tracy took back Lorelei, Andy Hooper and me in her car. Andy didn't sound too dispirited by his defeat, more energised by the rain and mud and hopeless skill of his own performance in the face of his team's collapse. Since Tracy had already checked out of her room, we offered her the use of our bathroom to tidy up. Tracy and I had just about dried off and changed when Bill turned up, also after the use of our bathroom facilities. The poor guy should have known better. First of all he was subject to various ribald comments, then when he escaped to the bathroom, Lorelei with a gleam of wickedness in her eyes, decided to pick the lock on the door, just to psyche him out. In this she succeeded, pushing the door open a crack before we retreated from the room, giggling childishly, to leave Bill in peace. Bill later commented that it was just his luck to have three women teasing him, and them all to be married.

The con suite was full of people who hadn't been to the softball and clearly thought we were all mad to have wasted time out in the wind and rain when there were fannish conversations to be had. There was a good mellow mood about the place aided by the microbrewery beer which apart from the dark beer (my favourite of the night before) were all still going strong. I wandered fairly happily from group to group. Ted White told a very human story about having his teeth fixed, the one Christmas where all he wanted really was new front teeth. Spike and I had a long conversation about librarianship in which we discovered that Spike until recently worked in a similar type of library to mine, and we were both French majors (as they call it, though all my Gallic military service was passed in the ranks of the foreign language assistants). The odd thing about this was that we'd known each other for years, since Spike was in London in the '80s and never realised that we had so much in common. After Spike got dragged away for high level talks about the food arrangements for the evening which seemed to involve a schism between those who wanted to call out for pizzas and Moshe and Lise who fancied going out for a barbecue (this being a genuine cuisine in America, not a demonstration of macho male garden cooking), I chatted to Scott Custis about the Scottish Worldcon which he and Jeanne were planning to attend. Being in a position of total ignorance about the winning Worldcon bid, apart from the knowledge that they were very slow at cashing cheques, we concentrated on the hopes that a good fannish presence and programme would ensure that the convention would offer some kind of competition to

the lure of the Scottish countryside, and would make the ever unnerving prospect of transatlantic flights (facing me in under twenty four hours, I realised) worthwhile.

I went to get another beer, and found that dinner plans had veered out of control and that we were all now going to go to some kind of diner that Spike knew. In the course of the conversation I suddenly realised that the woman wearing a badge that simply said Pat, who had seemed vaguely familiar all along, was in fact Pat Mueller whom I should have recognised from my TAPP trip back in 1988. But she was a lot paler than I remembered, and not so full of energy. Someone told me she had been ill - glandular fever I think, which might account for it. Still, it was good to see her again and look at the photo of her little girl. Spike, as was fitting, took the lead party out to the diner, driving off with Tom, Martin, Lorelei and me. We were well settled in our booth, having indulged Martin with a root beer to keep him from getting over-excited, by the time the next party turned up. They were all seated down the other end of the diner, but people kept dropping by and taking the sixth seat in our booth just to be sociable. The conversation turned once more to the Worldcon, and the idea of a British Corflu, or better still, a Corflu type stream within the Worldcon. It all sounded quite plausible at that distance from committee structures and planning meetings. I even came up with an accompanying scheme, whereby I would run an accomodation booking service for American fans and match them up with various fannish households according to their desired itinerary and tastes, keeping a steady flow of fans between cities to allow for convergence for parties and fan meetings, and avoidance of over-crowding where resources were stretched.

On the way back from the diner, Spike was overcome with pride in her former home city of Madison, and instead of taking us back to the hotel drove her captive passengers round to various lakeside views and other sights, ignoring Lorelei's protests that she would be car-sick. In between the stops, Lorelei told Martin and I the story of her ill-starred visit to England to stay with John Jarrold which featured a combination of her getting ill and John getting drunk, and resulted in her being totally incapable of saying where it was she had stayed. Martin and I becoming unnecessarily obsessed with this point, we began naming all the South coast towns we could think of with trainlines running into Charing Cross, and Martin even hauled out his diary to think of some more. "How about Bexhill on Sea?" he would suggest while Spike drove into someone's back garden to show us another lakeside view and Lorelei whimpered. Eventually Spike gave in and took us back to the hotel, while Lorelei promised to check whether she had John Jarrold's address with her.

Back at the convention I donated the remains of my white wine to the con suite to help eke out the dregs of the beer, and ended up sitting in the adjoining party room, talking to a mixture of Tracy, Jae-Leslie, Lorelei (who had to admit defeat on John Jarrold's address), Dave Hartwell, Bill and Martin. Since I had an early start the next day with an eight o'clock coach to Chicago, and the prospect of no sleep till the end of my transatlantic flight, I decided to go to bed early, even if I did get disturbed later, as Bill and Tracy were crashing in the room. In fact, I only half-consciously registered them coming in, then went back to sleep to dream of air accidents.

Monday 24th May : The Friendly Skies?

At some early hour of the next morning, Lorelei and I left Bill and Tracy in possession of the room and staggered with all our luggage down to the hotel reception where Lorelei's husband was due to meet us, and take me to the coach stop and Lorelei on to work. It was too early in the day to feel any regret at leaving the convention, or even to thank Lorelei and her husband adequately for looking after me, but I managed a few incoherent goodbyes, and dragged my case into the student's union to try and get a bit of breakfast before the bus left.

The trip to Chicago was uneventful, and no more scenic than the same route on the way out with Karen Babich, but the bus arrived at O'Hare airport on schedule, and I checked in with several hours to spare before my flight. The man at the

check-in desk looked rather doubtfully at my rather tight connection in Boston and decided to check my luggage all the way through to London.

Time-killing was going as well as could be expected when United Airlines came through with the announcement that one of the radars was out and that the incoming plane we were supposed to be using had been diverted to Milwaukee. Passengers would have to await further announcements. Not being a very patient passenger I went to the desk and asked what would happen about my connection. Since the staff were not clairvoyants, they sent me back to continue awaiting developments. Eventually they announced that they had found us another plane and we would only be about half an hour late departing. I did a quick calculation, and worked out that still gave me three quarters of an hour to change planes in Boston which sounded achievable, if not much fun. Unfortunately, this was reckoning without the queue of planes that had built up from when the radar was out, so by the time we finally left Chicago, climbing up in fitful jerks through a stormy sky, I was no longer convinced I would make it at all. I ate peanuts, watched MASH on the inflight entertainment and worried. Still, we made good time to Boston, coming in virtually on our side as we turned about 270 degrees round the bay into the airport, and I reckoned I was in with a chance. Dashing between terminals I spared a thought for my suitcase at the mercy of the baggage handlers, and rushed on till I caught sight with relief of the British Airways desk. They calmly issued me with a boarding pass and muttered reassuring platitudes about my baggage. I boarded the plane with about 15 minutes to spare and was so relieved to be occupying my seat that I couldn't even work up the energy to imagine the plane crashing on take-off. Six and a half hours later safely on the ground in a deeply overcast Heathrow, I stood by the baggage carousel and was not altogether surprised to see no sign of my suitcase. What did surprise me was that once I found an official, he actually had my suitcase listed as arriving on the next flight from Boston, and explained that if I filled out a customs declaration form they would deliver it to me later in the day. This sounded like a good deal. I could go home to sleep, and what's more, not even have to struggle round Reading station with my heavy suitcase. Best of all, it actually worked, and later in the day I was reunited with my suitcase, back safe and sound from its transatlantic travels.

"Not all pagan, role-playing, costuming TWP members are soft fruit controllers"

Mexicon : The Saga continues (though not if a) my wrist & b) my Amstrad PCW have anything to do with it)

Caveat : This report was written so long after the events described that factual inaccuracies are likely to abound and some of the witty repartee which naturally characterised the occasion may have been omitted or so mangled out of recognition that you might be excused for thinking that British fandom was populated by a bunch of dullards worn down to the bone by years of Conservative government.

Friday 28th May : Are We going to Scarborough Fair (or can I just stay at home)?

Jet-lagged, still-peeling and with no leave to spare, I was picked up on the outskirts of Bath after work by a car containing Peter-Fred, Chris Bell and Richard Hewison. We headed up cross-country to avoid the bank holiday traffic on the M5, stopped at a pub in Warwickshire largely to prevent Chris implementing her threat of listening to the Archers and ultimately reached Harrogate some time around 11 pm. Naturally we went to the wrong end of the town for the hotel. Naturally there was nowhere to park when we finally did get there. Naturally they announced that the free drinks bar was closing while I was stuck at reception, guarding a heap of luggage.

I really hate arriving late at conventions after a long drive. Everybody is about five degrees more friendly than I can take, and I try to shrink into a corner and pray not to be recognised. Still, once installed in the bar with a beer in front of me, my mood of misanthropy began to dissipate. Lesley Ward assured me that the free bar had only been serving sub-standard lager. Simon Polley gave me a fanzine. Simon Ounsley, at his first convention in years, looked healthier than most of the rest of us. Lillian's hair was so blonde, that I kept doing a double-take thinking it was someone else in there talking animatedly to my friends. There's a saying among us fans from the South West to the effect that if you sit long enough with the Leeds group they will digest you. Well, actually there isn't anything of the sort, but maybe there ought to be, judging from the way people seemed to get absorbed into the circle, and emerged hours later wondering where their life and independent volition had gone. After the restless friendships and constant need to prove myself at Corflu, it felt faintly immoral to sit in the same circle, doing little to enhance the general well-being other than drink my beer and listen to those within range. I kept thinking that I should be out there making new friends, barely consoled by Lillian's hard-headed assessment that there were no interesting new people out there to be met and befriended. It was Friday. It was Mexican. It was a well-worn groove, and I was too relaxed to really care that it should be different.

Saturday 29th May : Fans about Town

The hotel room that I was sharing with Lillian and Peter-Fred struck me as being very small - or was it just an illusion after three weeks of huge American rooms with their twin king-sized beds? Peter-Fred couldn't say. But if we reluctantly gave the room the benefit of the doubt over its size, there was no question about the undesirability of the loud banging noises that woke us up in the morning. Someone was desperately repairing the hotel, perhaps having been warned that one hotel in Scarborough would fall down the cliff in the near future and not wanting it to be theirs. Unaware at that point in time of the urgency of the task Peter Fred was seriously considering asking for a change of room, but in the end, apathy prevailed.

Saturday morning proved sunny. Pale fans dressed all in black were to be seen stepping outside the hotel and shuddering as they found themselves unwontedly exposed to the solar elements in the short trip from the hotel bar to the comfortably dark confines of the games shop across the street.

In the meantime, other more outdoor types were bringing together parties to climb up to the castle, and by the time my coterie (Lillian, Peter-Fred and Richard) had assembled for a stroll, one might be excused for thinking that far from being like a Novacon (as some were to claim), this Mexican was turning into the image of a Jersey Eastercon. At least, so it seemed to me, judging by the parties of fans out around town, along the cliff tops, or climbing up and down from the castle. More than once the fan-spotter's war cry of "Fan Fan Fan" went up as we relived "Fan Spotting at Gorey Castle" (See Caprician 4, May 1989 for further details), recognising them less by stigmata (beard, glasses, bag slung across body) as by name (Hi Maureen! Hi Lesley! Hi Iain!). Climbing up to Scarborough Castle was quite an event in itself. Either we chose a very convoluted route or the Scarborough Tourist Board are sadists, but each time we climbed up another slope or another set of steps and stopped to admire the view (a pursuit much favoured by the less fit amongst us i.e. everyone except Peter-Fred) it seemed that we were no nearer getting in the castle than before. We kept skirting bits of castle wall which looked if not impregnable, then at least inaccessible and wondering if we had been conned and there was no way in at all. To make matters worse, Lillian kept pointing at distant bits of sun-drenched greenery and insisting that they were where she wished to sit, right now. After a misguided attempt to get to one of these spots, we found ourselves suddenly and totally unexpectedly confronted with the castle entrance. Oh no, we realised, now we would have to pay up and go in after all. Actually, everyone was so thirsty after the climb that they seemed more keen on negotiating the purchase of little cartons of nastily hot fruit juice than actually seeing the castle. And once we did get inside, all we had the energy for was to flop out in the

sun, and hope that sooner or later we might see Iain Banks scale part of the castle walls.

We might well have stayed there all afternoon, except that I wanted to get back for the fanzine panel. Having already failed in phase one of my plan to compare Corflu and Mexicon by not going to the publishing panel, I thought I better at least make it back for the fanzine panel, the one and only piece of daytime programming to be set against another event (i.e. the launch of Colin Greenland's Harm's Way, which I wouldn't have minded going to either). So dragging a rather reluctant Lilian behind me, we made it into the infamously darkened hall of the Mexicon programme room about half way through the panel, to find a handful of fans, notably Ian Sorensen and Simon Ounsley, interacting with the distant chat show circle of Eve Harvey, Pam Wells and Simon Polley. The debate as usual seemed to centre on the demise of the fanzine, though escaped some of the usual clichés by the revelation that there was a - gasp - NEW fanzine editor in the audience. Also Simon Polley would keep refusing to play the doom and gloom game and kept saying things like he just did his fanzines to please himself and had received plenty of positive response. Lilian prodded me a few times till I stood up and said my piece about the vibrancy of the American fanzine scene as evidenced by Corflu. No-one seemed very excited. British fandom looked at its watch and decided it had done its duty by the fanzine, and could it go back to the bar now?

The next event was Paul Kincaid interviewing Pat Cadigan which seemed worth checking out even though I hadn't really rated Pat's work when I read the short story collection "Patterns". In person, though, Pat was certainly worth the admission fee, there were plenty of lively anecdotes from Pat's radical youth and musings on the ideas behind her books. All the same, I kept being overwhelmed by the urge to nod off to sleep. Was the room too hot or was it the womb-like darkness tech-ops had so thoughtfully prepared for us? I didn't know, but in the end I was glad to escape into some fresh daylight air.

The event for the evening was the Norman Spinrad chilli, which at one pound a ticket sounded too good to miss. In fact, at two pounds a ticket we might have done a bit better, as the hotel staff were only serving out the tiniest portions imaginable. Then Lilian went on to destroy our confidence in the product by declaring it tame compared with the sort of chilli she was used to. I tried to defend it by pointing out there was a real chilli in my portion, but apart from exciting a modicum of envy, didn't make much headway. Fortunately, the hotel staff realised that they had given so little away that we could all have seconds (and probably thirds as well!), and we queued up for dinner part two. As a meal it would probably keep us going till the midnight munchies, but as an occasion it lacked even the modest comfort of a canteen meal, let alone the convivial atmosphere that could have been created with a bit less bureaucracy and a bit more Mexican panache (a kind of shandy, I believe)

With eating so abruptly and brutally over, the evening ahead seemed long and formless. There was supposed to be a programme item on called the Light Programme featuring a game run along the lines of the old BBC children's programme Crackerjack, and a radio play which I had been momentarily interested in participating in before Eve told me all the good parts had gone, but somehow nobody seemed sufficiently enthusiastic to go along and check it out. Opening a bottle of wine and lying around in the hotel room catching up on fanzines and gossip seemed a much better idea, even if it meant I would have nothing scathing to write in my con-report.

Next came the question of what to wear for the evening. Not so much the etiquette questions of America i.e. what kind of clothes to wear, as what on earth could I find from my hasty packing to accord with the gradually unfolding taste of the convention for mini-skirts (as evidenced by Maureen Speller and Pat Cadigan). Settling for black leggings, transparent(ish) top and the Lilian seal of approval, I set out to investigate the convention and see what it had turned into in my absence. Fortunately, events seemed to have come on a bit since the chilli non-event. Various women stood around in clumps wearing interesting clothes, whilst the men proudly sported a selection of bright waistcoats. It looked like I had just missed, as ever, the free drinks from another publisher's party. Downstairs a band

was playing, though predictably the received wisdom of fans old before their time branded them as too noisy to merit attention. Eventually inveterate dancer Jenny Jones dragged me and Lillian down to join in, where we found Peter-Fred already disporting himself on the by then packed dance floor.

After the band finished, some of the good atmosphere dissipated, as the night time people seemed to weary of their role of exotic colour, abandoning the scene to the stalwart jumper wearing fraternity, such as Simon Ounsley and Nigel Richardson. The Leeds drinking circle was still in situ, boosted by Jenny Jones and other members of the by now legendary (due to lack of actual meetings) Apricot writer's group. There must have been a few strangers around for this was the night when Lillian heard Simon Polley drooling "Who's that woman in the short black dress with short dark hair" and could not resist saying "That's your wife" (even though it wasn't) (and then writing up the incident for the Cactus Times). At some stage I realised that I was in the exact same circle as I had been the night before, and knew that there were only two choices, one to get stupidly drunk or two to get out before the trophies (entropy and atrophy) set in. I believe that I must have opted for the latter as I lived to tell the tale (and get the breakfast).

Sunday 30th May : How to lose friends and fail to influence Worldcon fan-room organisers

In a fit of suicidal energy, Lillian and I had decided to nail our colours to the mast and instigate a fact-finding meeting on the progress of the fan programme at the Scottish Worldcon. One o'clock Sunday had seemed a suitably distant and sensible hour back on Saturday when we organised the notice to be put into the newsletter, but as the time approached, we realised that it was far too early in the day to be coherent, and that besides, Steve Glover, one half of the fan programming team was stuck in a BSFA meeting (Jenny, the other half, was not at the convention at all). All the same, a small circle gathered. Chris O'Shea appeared as token committee representative. A pizza appeared as token lunch substitute. Ian Sorensen appeared because his name was in the newsletter.

We suggested that Chris begin with a resumé of the convention's progress, which sounded harmless enough, but before we knew it, we had not an update, but a full scale debate on the convention's channels of communication on our hands. Chris took the attitude that most people knew what was going on, while Lillian and I pointing out that such methods of communication as committee apas, e-mail and meetings in London did not necessarily get through to the average fan in the provinces.

The unintentional hostility of this exchange was obviously infectious, because next two women who had come along to see if they could help, left in a huff. Then Steve Glover turned up, obviously very put out by the lack of notice and convinced that any questions were intended as a direct attack on his and Jenny's organisation of the fan programme (which they weren't). He explained that between them they had written to hundreds of fans from all around the world. All well and good, we tried to agree, but what about setting up a sub-committee to help them with the work? What about using the experience of the workers on the last British fan-room? What about being proactive with some ideas to give a context to the input they were soliciting?

At about this point, Caroline Mullan happened by, and took one look at the hostile body language round the table and decided that it was her chance to try out some of the people-management skills she had been working on. We were directed to stop being confrontational forthwith and look for positive solutions to our difficulties. I began to feel as if perhaps I had been married to Steve Glover for years without my knowledge. I began to dread that we should be made to kiss and make up. I began to see that Caroline's technique might just work as all my irritation at Steve was slowly draining away to be replaced by resentment over Caroline's subconscious air of superiority.

In the end, sanity prevailed, and Simon Ounsley suggested that there could be some kind of meeting in Leeds for people interested in helping with the fan room. Also it was agreed that perhaps Steve and Jenny could take on some fannish advisors without undermining the status of their letter-writing campaign or their

file of (at present) blank index cards for programme ideas. Ian Sorensen suggested it might even save their marriage. I looked round warily, but it was alright, Ian meant Steve and Jenny, and was only offering a warning about the high casualty rate among the previous Worldcon committee. The circle broke into individual discussion groups, and Lilian and I seized our chance to escape, retiring shattered to the comparative calm of the swimming pool.

Somewhere in the recovery period I missed the Tom Shippey lecture which I had planned to attend, so know nothing about it other than tach-ops' rather petty complaint about his inability to stand in his allotted circle of light. By the time I emerged, sneaking into Nick's bar in trepidation in case there was still a circle of people discussing Intersection, I found that the rock panel had already begun, been viewed and found wanting. Music fan Lesley Ward pronounced it pointless. She said they were just all sitting round trying to name tracks that had some kind of SF motif. It was also pointed out that although Pam Wells was apparently an obvious choice for this sort of panel, the programming committee had overlooked the fact that she might know her music, but doesn't actually read SF. With such reviews to discourage me, I decided to stay in the bar and help with the programme of drinking enough Sol (or was it Corona?) to get Sarah Dibbs a T-Shirt.

Still, by the time the Norman Spinrad interview came up, I felt that I had done my bit for the Mexican beer industry, and really ought to catch at least one programme item for the day. I was also curious to see editor Ellen Datlow who was conducting the interview, having corresponded with her in the past, and resisted Paul Barazier's threat to drag me over and introduce me to her. The conversation was already in progress by the time I got in. Norman and Ellen were seated comfortably under the spotlights, having a rather cosy chat which after a few moments of tuning-in I realised was about Spinrad's experiences of Europe from living in Paris. He had a rather slow, monotone style of delivery that would probably have made the most rivetting of subject matters sound dull, but I soon realised that what he was talking about actually *was* dull. It might be fascinating to fellow American Ellen Datlow to hear how Europe differs from America (e.g. how small the countries are in Europe, how many different languages there are, the excitement in Europe over the iron curtain coming down etc) but it was hardly news to us who lived in Europe all the time. The interview badly needed shaking to life with a few controversial questions that would force Norman into telling us something we didn't know. I kept waiting, in case it would get any better, but ultimately it became clear that Ellen forte was as an editor not an interviewer (though she was pleasant enough) and that she and Norman were quite happy with their conversation, and didn't need me smothering yawns from the audience to continue with it.

Throughout the day, in fact right from the start of the convention, Lilian had been touting a controversial resistance to the received opinion that we all had to go and see Ken Campbell's one man show Pigsport. Her view seemed to be based round three poles, one that who'd want to see a show with a name like Pigsport, two she had seen something else of Ken's and not been impressed, and three it would mess up our dinner plans. Not entirely convinced, I held out some resistance until Martin Smith accidentally let drop that Pigsport was actually the second part of a trilogy, then further muddied the picture by repeating the rumour that Ken would not in fact be performing Pigsport, but its sequel, the third part of the trilogy. Thereafter, no amount of panegyric by Martin on the humour and quality of the first two parts, which he had already seen, or signed affidavits that they had nothing to do with baseball, could quite persuade me that I really wanted to dedicate my evening to the third part of a trilogy. Besides the temptress Lilian was there to whisper in my ear that it might be long and boring, that we would have to queue for ages, and that she had heard a recommendation for a nice Chinese restaurant up the road.

So as everyone else from the convention, or so we thought, queued up to be let into the performance, Lilian, Peter-Fred, Richard Hewison, Bruce Saville and I struck out in search of food. The Chinese restaurant was fairly full, but they found us a table near the back. It wasn't any surprise to see that the largish party on the next table was a group of fans, and nor were we greatly distressed to see that they included among others Roy Peyton, Peter and Eileen Weston, Tom Shippey and John Jarrold. Perhaps we should have been more wary, because the first thing that

emerged was that John was celebrating his fortieth birthday. Champagne appeared on the adjacent table and in a fit of largesse, John asked the waiter to bring us a bottle too. What luck, we thought. Also this looked like my big chance to settle the vexed question of where Lorelei had spent her holidays. Even drunk, John Jarrold should be able to manage his own address. "Where do you live?" I asked with no further finesse. John, taking the question in his stride, said "St Leonards," thus proving in its solution that the mystery had never been worth thinking about in the first place.

This was to be one of the last sensible answers to be extracted from John that evening. Soon after, the singing began. Not just one song, but a large part of his repertoire of show songs. John would start a song, and urge the rest of the table to join in. The arrival of food barely brought any pause in the performance. It was jolly lucky for the restaurant, we began to think, that we knew our neighbours. It was jolly lucky we had been bribed with champagne, so that we wouldn't mind the embarrassment of their company. Just to prove that we were entering into the spirit of the occasion, we even managed to find a short interval of silence to launch into "Happy Birthday". Then the drunken chorus went on. The waiters began to look increasingly worried. Rog Peyton came over to confide in us that he was stone cold sober and could see what the rest of the customers were thinking. It clearly wasn't anything complimentary, but shielded behind our neighbours we could only see a few rather hostile backs.

Under cover of the noise we agreed between ourselves that we were getting a much better evening's entertainment than any number of "Pigsurts".

Back at the hotel, all was quiet, apart from one corner of the bar where John Jarrold was still carolling forth. "Pigsurt" or rather its successor was still in progress, making Lillian positively exultant. "Think how bored we would be by now!" she crowed. And when she found someone who had given up on it at the first interval, she felt herself positively vindicated. In the mean time, Eileen Weston's roving eye had fallen on Richard, and wanted to know who "that nice young man" was. We of course readily provided details, always happy to embarrass Richard.

At long last, the playgoers were released, and it was time for the TWP meeting. The women of the apa assembled and once more we embarked on the perennial search for somewhere suitable to meet. As usual we were only partially successful and ended up in a rather cramped space under the stairs. We were just near enough the party to bring through cups of punch (though a jug would have been more appropriate), and were relatively comfortable so long as no-one tried to stand up too quickly. One of the women turned out to be Laura Wheatly's legendary friend Fran, famous among other things for running a brothel in America, and less famous for having done a course in French and Theatre Studies with me at Warwick University. After talking to her for a bit, I ended up being debriefed by Pam Wells on everything I'd seen and done in Madison. As I had supposed, Pam knew far more about the background to the people and events than I, but could not be persuaded into telling all, try as I might, but contented herself with dropping hints that just made matters more mysterious. The TWP meeting fizzled out approximately coterminously with the end of the punch, and it was back to the bar to find out if there was any more fun to be had there. The answer, I deduced, after sitting around for some time with Lillian, Nigel Richardson and Simon Ounsley (now, the official late night mover of the convention) was probably no.

Monday 31st May : No more (please!)

None of us felt like getting up for breakfast since we had meal tickets valid for lunch and too much need of sleep to move before we absolutely had to, which in this case was 12 o'clock for check-out. Down in Nick's Bar we tried to redeem our lunch tickets, only to find that they weren't actually serving lunch. Indignant enquires brought us the news that we might be able to use our tickets in the tea room, which did serve light lunches. We took our place, and after a great deal of negotiation were eventually granted permission to eat, using our meal tickets. Mike Ford hid behind a newspaper throughout. In between placing our order and any suspicion of food occurring, the remaining tables were filled up rapidly with fans

also looking for the promised lunch on their final breakfast voucher. The staff of this rather small catering outlet had clearly not been warned and were ill-equipped to cope with the demand. To quell the worst of the complaints, orders were gradually taken, but food only arrived infrequently, and in small batches. We were relatively lucky, being one of the first to order. Simon Ounsley who joined our party before the food arrived was still waiting for his omelette long after we had been served and finished.

Actually, I might just as well have waited with Simon, since a brief reconnoitre confirmed that I couldn't face the panel in progress, which was something electronic featuring Charles Stross, and so I simply wandered around in a desultory fashion noting who was still there and trying to decide what if anything I should buy from the bookroom and whether I wished to join any more conventions (which, on the whole, I decided I didn't).

The closing ceremony was not particularly inspiring. Tech ops thought it was funny to blare out their favourite line "We are in control" when Mike Ford wanted to speak. Mike Ford had nothing of note to say anyway. The committee congratulated themselves on doing a good job. Various people were given prizes. It all took a long time. At the very end, Caroline Mullan was given the floor to continue the debate on the worldcon, which at least meant that a few more people were drawn into the discussion, notably Chris Donaldson and Paul Oldroyd, one of the surviving marriages from the last Worldcon who said that so far none of their expertise had been called on by the current committee either. Arnold Aiken made some potentially useful suggestions, then got sidetracked into talking about his personal problems. It all began to seem a bit futile, not because there wasn't interest, but because none of the right committee members seemed to be there to participate in the debate. It was all very well us non-combattants agreeing that certain things should be done, but if none of our suggestions were going to be followed up by the Worldcon organisation then we were just wasting our breath.

Finally this last debate drew to a close too, and conscious of a long drive back, Peter and I rounded up our passengers, tied mother of three, Chris Bell into her seat so that she wouldn't try to escape, and headed back to Bristol.

For further details on Mexicon 5, please see Lagoon 5, but don't ask me where empowerment comes into it. I'm not empowered to say.

Verdict : The Semi-Intelligent Bit

Comparing Corflu and Mexicon is not after all comparing like with like. Mexicon can fairly be said to be a mainstream British convention, whereas Corflu is definitely a special interest gathering. Fanzines originally underpinned the Mexicon ethos but were never overtly part of its brief. Corflu began with fanzines and has stuck with them. I suspect that over the course of its ten years Corflu has shared the highs and lows of the fanzine community and reading through the history of Corflu, compiled by Andy Hooper for the Corflu 10 programme book, some of the Corflus have obviously had quite low attendance levels (e.g. only 50 fans at Corflu 3 in Virginia). All the reports, though, suggest that whatever the size, the events have been enjoyed by organisers and attendees alike, and that their lack of pretension to be anything other than a small friendly gathering for fanzine fans has helped develop traditions and a formula that can be successfully carried out by almost any fan group without placing too great a strain on their resources, meaning that there is likely to continue to be a venues and organisers for the convention for many years to come. (It's perhaps significant that both after Ditto (a very similar type of fanzine convention) and Corflu I've come away with the conviction that it would be nice to run this sort of convention in the UK i.e. that it might actually be enjoyable. And I'm not what anybody over here would class as a con-runner.)

Corflu 10 may have been uncharacteristic. It certainly had the good fortune to coincide with an upturn in fandom and fanzine production in America and to be held in Madison at a time of high fan activity in that city. Also my perception of the event was certainly skewed by the novelty value of meeting a group of people I

didn't know or hadn't seen for many years. All the same, it seemed there was a very real sense of vibrancy and purpose at Corflu which I haven't felt in British fandom for a number of years. This group was happy with itself; was celebrating fanzines not apologising for them. And even people like Lorelei who I suspect has no great passion for fanzines (she told me that she left the Turboapa because she couldn't see much point in writing for a group of people she hung out with anyway - which may not be quite the same thing, but is indicative of the type of personality which is happier creating itself in person than in print) seemed to enjoy the convention as a social event.

What I liked about Corflu too was the setting. Not just Madison, which is a great city to wander round, but the way that the convention was held in a light spacious terrace overlooking a swimming pool. I know this would not suit all British tastes, but it avoids the claustrophobic sense of futility I often get at British conventions from spending the daylight hours in dark smoky bars. It felt like we were half-way human, not some strange breed of troglodyte condemned to drink ourselves silly to avoid having to go to a programme item or admitting that after all we're not sure what we're doing at the convention. In some ways I did even like the lack of alcohol around American fandom. Not to the extremes that you could barely get a drink on Friday evening, but to the extent that during the day it was more natural to pick up a soda, or a piece of fruit than to order another pint of beer. (Yes, I know no-one forces me to drink during the day at British conventions, but it just seems to happen, sort of by osmosis!)

I also liked the way that a portion of my membership fee went on something I could directly benefit from which was the food and drink in the hospitality suite and the Sunday brunch. I often feel, particularly at Novacons that I'm getting nothing in return for my membership fee other than the right to talk to my friends and book a room in the hotel. I know it may be that I don't go to the right events, or that I don't appreciate how much it costs simply to set the whole thing up, but I do sometimes wonder where the money goes. At Corflu I could actually see some returns on my investment, and also get the advantage of participating in communal events like the brunch which could only work if it was set up for everyone. I realise that this sort of event wouldn't necessarily be successful at a larger convention with less obvious common ground between the members, but I don't see why hospitality suites couldn't work at larger conventions, since they can and do at worldcons.

Mexicon was clearly the more ambitious of the two conventions I attended. For a start it was attempting to cover almost three days worth of programming, and was catering for at least twice as many members. So perhaps it is unfair to judge it simply on my gut feelings that it was less interesting than Corflu. For a start I attended a much lower percentage of the programme, and missed out on various items that might have changed my perspective e.g. Ken Campbell's performance, Tom Shippey's lecture, Ian McDonald's guest spot. On the other hand, maybe this low attendance level is indicative in itself. There never seemed to be any feeling of necessity about anything that was happening on the programme, and those items I did make an effort to see were not always actually worth going to. I remember the early Mexicons, where the whole point was to get as many people into the programme as possible. That ethos seems to have been abandoned. Its last vestiges remained in the queues for the Ken Campbell performance, but overall there was no feeling that by not attending the programme one might be missing out on something vital to the experience of the convention. Yet at Corflu where the panels were more thrown together than constructed, and the same people used and reused, there was an air of spontaneity and engagement in the discussions that I never felt at the bits of Mexicon I attended. There was also a sense of interaction between audience and panellists that made us all participants rather than simply bodies in the hall fighting to stay awake, or getting up the courage to ask a question.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to knock Mexicon. Mexicon had a much tougher formula to work to than Corflu and it's a remarkable achievement that it has survived for almost a decade, giving Britain a regular convention dedicated to literary SF. I appreciate that, even if I carp. In truth, it's both a victim and beneficiary of its early success. Without the standards set by Mexicons 1 and 2, I

doubt that Mexicon 5 would have attracted 300 members. But anyone working on the committee must get fed up with the fact that whatever they do, people are almost certain to say it's not as good as it was in the old days. I think the key to the problem is the word I mentioned earlier - formula. Mexicon is turning into something of a formula production. Get in some interesting guest, preferably from America. Arrange for a play or performance of some description. Dole out the Mexican punch. And hope that the rest falls into place. To be fair on the committee for Mexicon 5 there were attempts to depart from the formula. There was the Mexican lecture, which at least sounded in keeping with the Mexican ethos, and Crackerjack and SF on the Radio, which seemed rather less so. I know, the committee can't win. If they try and make it too different, then people complain it's not a proper Mexicon. If they don't, then it's the same old stuff, and no-one wants to know.

Still, the team seem to have cracked it. Next year we are being offered the one-day Mexicon, which in itself is a sufficient change of format to make things different. Also one day conventions are far more likely to attract both a critical mass of guests and people attending the programme (since you can't convince yourself that there will always be time to catch up on it the next day), so bodes well for restoring the type of intensive interaction that Mexicon was once famous for. (Though since writing that I've heard that the one-day event is planned as a relaxacon! This sounds seriously like a missed opportunity.)

As for Corflu, next year's will be in Washington DC, one week before Washington's own annual convention Disclave, so it looks like the perfect opportunity for some intrepid fan to go out there and report on the two conventions back to back. But, not me, I'm afraid. No, I haven't learnt my lesson, or sworn never again to attend two conventions in a row - but I don't really have the money for it. And besides, Bridget Wilkinson's told me about this rather interesting Eurocon in Romania...

October 1993