

Never Quite Arriving #5



Steve Stiles

Where is my mind?

The story so far : In a fit of Weltschmerz, Christina has quit her job, let her house to a pair of gay guys with a stuffed dog, bought herself a round the world air ticket and headed out to the East coast of America where she plans to live in her friends' basement and write weighty tomes on the meaning of life. Now Read On, or, this is NEVER QUITE ARRIVING 5, the long-awaited sequel to Dragonburst 3, incorporating Blackbird's Egg 6.5, and is not eligible for the Nova, because a) it was completed on the same weekend as Novacon, b) was written entirely in American and c) nobody ever votes for me anyway.

Never fear the rest of this fanzine is going to be entirely sensible. Any non-sensible parts were inserted by the PowerBook 520c and Oregon Nut Brown Ale and should be disregarded accordingly. The virtual Novacon report has been struck from the record due to lack of scandal and for not wearing a crushed velvet dress with lycra Wonderbra. Corny lines and crap dialogue have all been borrowed from Babylon 5 and should not be returned to Straczynski under any circumstances, unless you actually wish to see the series pulled from the network before season 5.

Time for some more capitals. This fanzine comes from CHRISTINA LAKE of no fixed abode. My mailing address through 15th April 1997 (see, I told you this fanzine was written in American) will be 57 EDWARDS ROAD, WAHROONGA, NSW 2076, AUSTRALIA, but any mail sent to 12 HATHERLEY ROAD, BISHOPSTON, BRISTOL, BS7 8QA, UK will be forwarded to me on merit, or kept in a heap in my brother's kitchen till I return. If you live in Britain, you might as well send locs to the Bristol address as I doubt issue 6 will emerge before I'm reunited with my computer some time at the start of June 1997. If you live in America, then congratulations, you have won life's lottery and so can afford to send me fanzines and locs to Australia. Please don't send anything to my address in Belmont liable to arrive after 6th December as it will probably be eaten by guinea pigs, and even if it isn't, it will be very much pot luck as to whether it will be forwarded or not. If you live in Australia or New Zealand then I am probably sleeping on your living room floor right now or plan to do so in the next few weeks, so just remember I don't drink tea or coffee and love antipodean wines (particularly New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc).

Text for this issue is all by and about me, apart from the letter column, but if you were at Toner or LAcon or live in Washington DC it might be worth egoscanning the relevant sections. Artwork for this issue comes from Steve Stiles (cover), Bill Rotsler (p.11, which he sketched for me during a panel at Toner) and Brad Foster (p.30)

This issue is going out to :

In the USA, anyone who's traded fanzines, hospitality, friendship or any other form of interaction with me during my stay. I've had a great time and I'm really glad to have met or renewed acquaintance with so many of you. Hope I'll be back soon - maybe for a Corflu?

In the UK, all my friends and anyone else I regularly trade with. (Thanks to Bernie Evans for photocopying and distribution.)

In Australia and New Zealand, not sure. I guess I'll find out when I get there!

Copies are available for trade, letters of comments, new cassettes, contacts in South East Asia, P K Dick paperbacks, Will Self's restaurant review columns in the Observer and friendly postcards in my mail box

I'm heading for the trees over there (or songs that will always remind me of Summer/Fall '96)

Ash Goldfinger/ Fugees Killing me softly with his song/ Nada Surf Popular/ Superdrag Kissing the Bride/ Primitive Radio Gods Broken Phone Booth/ Fugees Ready or Not/ Butthole Surfers Pepper/ No doubt Spiderweb/ The Eels Novocaine/ Throwing Muses Freeloader/ Stone Temple Pilots Lady Picture Show/ The Heads The Damage that I Did

New English Ways

When I turned up in the Boston area in early June to stay at Dave and Jenny Raggett's house I was immediately plunged into a crash course in Internet culture whilst discovering the hard way (is there any easy way?) the realities of life with two primary school age children. This is what I wrote about it at the time :

I am staying in a household where HTML is the lingua franca, style-sheets are hotly debated and Netscape employees are frequently dismissed as a bunch of technical incompetents. This is all because Dave works for the WWW consortium and lives, eats and breathes the Internet, while his wife Jenny has just written a book on HTML and is now hooking up with some guy in Geneva to produce a crazy history of the web.

So far so good, but add to the equation of the household dynamics, two children, Thomas age 10 and Louise age 8, and suddenly the pleasing virtualities of life in a civilised net community are displaced by screams for cookies and the thump of cushions against unsuspecting, but definitely real-time heads. Thomas and Louise, despite being British, now have American accents. Somehow it comes as no surprise that their favourite TV show is the Simpsons. Thomas is clearly trying out for Bart, and he's not doing so bad either. Louise doesn't have the intellectual pretensions of a Lisa Simpson, but otherwise fits the role of kid sister as stooge, opponent and additional gadfly to a T.

What to make of this new world? I must admit I spent my first couple of days in Boston in a state of panic. A sort of "What have I done?" feeling. I'd been so busy sorting out everything to make it possible to leave England for a year that by the time I went for the flight I was totally numb. I didn't spend the night before dreaming about plane crashes, I wasn't even nervous when we took off (I normally am), I wasn't excited like I had been last time I went to America, just totally matter-of-fact. So, perhaps it wasn't surprising that some kind of feeling should catch up with me in Boston. Hell, I thought. Why am I here? I had a comfortable life at home. Now I'm going to spend a year fitting in with other people, and I'll have NO CONTROL at all. What's the point of travelling? What am I hoping to gain from it? Won't I just have lots of uncomfortable and frightening experiences, then come home with no money?

Like I said, panic.

This lasted a day or two, then was displaced by frantic activity. I had to get a car so I could go down to Pennsylvania. I had to find out all about style-sheets, so that I could join Jenny in writing the book. I had to fill my notebook with astute observations on American society so that I could write incisive commentaries to validate my stay. I had to master all the bus and train routes into Cambridge and downtown Boston. I had to finish my article on Leeds that I was selling to a British tourist mag. At the same time, I felt impelled to secure my niche in the household ecology by paying for a big batch of shopping, taking the children out for pizza, doing masses of washing up, stepping in to cook meals and volunteering to babysit

By the end of the first week, I had bought a car and already had it towed back to the garage to be repaired. One thing you have to understand is that I have never owned a car in my life. I know nothing about cars. Dave & Jenny know nothing about cars (Dave's a virtual guy. Why would he want to get his hands messy with car engines?). I just went round the dealers with two rules in mind, don't buy anything too old, and don't buy anything with over 100K on the engine. I rapidly had to add another rule. Don't buy anything with gears. You cannot imagine how disconcerting it is to reach to change gear and find your hand is grasping at the door lock. If I wanted to survive the transition to right-hand driving I sensed I would have to stick to an automatic. So I went round the dealers, and either their cars were wrecks, or too expensive, or had too many miles on the clock. So in the end, in desperation, I let a salesman convince me that something much older and bigger than I really wanted would do. An American car, he said, easier to get the parts. Less small parts to go wrong. Only 77K on the clock (assuming it hadn't been tampered with). Safer than a small car. Lots of room in the trunk. Automatic. Six stroke engine (whatever that is), so good fuel consumption. I was tired of spending all my time in dodgy car lots. I decided to buy it, if only because it meant I could spend the

afternoon in Harvard Square instead, drink milkshake at Au Bon Pain, check out the American music scene at HMV and cycle round the collegiate sights of Cambridge, free from car angst, demanding children and thoughts of HTML .

These brief moments of carefree tourism, soon faded into oblivion when I went to collect the car the following Tuesday. I managed to drive it back to Belmont without getting lost, or getting myself killed - a major achievement in itself - but I was having a bit of trouble with the parking brake. I tried to take Jenny to fetch the children and couldn't get the brake to release, stopped the car in the middle of the driveway (which is shared by several local residents) and couldn't restart it. In the mean time, Jenny grabbed her bike and sped off towards the school. I discovered that I had left my key in my other bag and couldn't get back in the house to phone the garage. Meanwhile, the neighbour came back, and had to reverse her car back down the drive and round to their house in the opposite direction. Fortunately she's a nice person, and let me use her phone and gave me a popsicle (the all American panacea, at least for children under 10. But by then, I felt about as much in charge as an under 10). The garage came out, explained that what I had done was activate one of the security features of the car, while I was looking for the parking brake release, and that's why it wouldn't start. But, they couldn't deactivate it themselves, so ended up towing my car away just as Thomas and Louise returned ("Is that your new car? Cool! Why are they towing it away?")

After that, I lost all my remaining confidence in being a car owner. I joined AAA and set out to Pennsylvania convinced that I wouldn't make it. Between my driving habits (never that good even in England) and the car, what price a successful 300 mile journey? At least the driving conditions are good, I thought. Wrong. I hit the first storm somewhere in New Jersey, struggled to find my wind-screen wipers and stared out through the cascading rain, wondering if I was still in lane. At least the sky was getting light ahead. In the second storm, the sky was seriously black, lightening jagged down in front of me and I couldn't find how to switch on my headlights. I slowed right down, the road was just a stream of water, and counted off the miles to my only hope, an upcoming service station.

So, I survived ordeal by car. Spent a good weekend in Pennsylvania and Washington. Met lots of fun people, who all wanted to know what I would do next. Hell, what would I do next, now I'd visited the nearest people I knew in the US of A ? I felt they all expected me to take off in my car and drive like a maniac until I'd seen all that America had to offer. What would this do to my bank balance? My nerves? My plans for writing and reading?

I went back to Boston and collapsed into a state of apathy. More panic. Why had I bought a car? I would probably never be able to resell it. It would probably keep on breaking down, leaving me with huge garage bills when my 30 days warranty ran out. Why had I told people I was going to write? What did I have to write about ? I'd been in America two whole weeks, and I still didn't have anything relevant to say. I hated my novel - it sucked. I'm no good at writing history and I've lost faith in my characters. I felt like I was only trying to do it out of habit. But the few pages I'd written since coming to America were unconvincing in the extreme. Maybe I can't write fiction any more. Maybe I've killed off all the brain cells with words in them.

So I just hung out with the family and read Prozac Nation (subtitled "Young and depressed in America". I'm not that young, and I'm not really depressed, but it seemed to suit my mood somehow.) Family life reaches its most intense at the weekend. I made the mistake of going on an excursion in the Raggetts' car. I had to sit in the back between Thomas and Louise and a big green plastic crocodile, trying to keep the peace. They decided that I'm their grandma (thanks, kids!) and told me my fortune by spitting into my hand ("You'll have a swimming pool. one day.") To pass the time, we did an A-Z of swearwords and insults, and I tried to refrain from suggesting worse ones than they already knew.

Then some kind of perspective began to kick in. Who's saying I have to achieve anything, and particularly, who's saying I should achieve anything right now? How on earth can I know what I want to write about when I haven't given my brain any time to take in and mulch some ideas. I need to relax, take it as a sabbatical. If something productive comes of it, then good. If not, then maybe I

just needed to sleep and read. In the mean time, I'm getting a real buzz out of simply being here. Being more than a tourist, being someone who can get a library card, who can go into the liquor store and have someone say (damned if I know who), "It's Christina!", who can find good places and go back to them, who can go out in the car and be independent. The more places I learn to drive to, without mishap, the more confidence I get. It's not sightseeing and it's not writing; it's more like settling in. The concept that no-one seems to understand. That I'm taking six months here simply because I want to live in another country. Not because I want to see all of America (though I do have several trips planned), but because I haven't lived outside my country since 1979 when I lived in France for a year, and I've always wanted to again. And here's a chance. Also, it's very beautiful here in Belmont. The house is a big old house on the top of the hill, and I can sit out on the porch and look at the trees, flowers and birds, and, on a clear day, you can make out the skyline of downtown Boston, just to add that touch of exotica. In quality of life terms it's infinitely better than my house in Bristol with its tiny yard, only a short way from a big main road. Belmont might be a bit like toytown with its buildings labelled "Town Hall", "Municipal Light Department", "Police Station" etc, but it's still a pleasant place to be, and when suburbia palls, there's always the city life of Cambridge and Boston just a bus ride away .

By the end of the next month I was sounding more chirpy. My car was still working. Dave and Jenny's neighbours had introduced me to the wonders of Cape Cod (where they own a house on the edge of a lake). The Raggetts went away to Europe for most of July, leaving me in charge of the house.

For nearly a whole month I was sole mistress of the guinea pigs and rabbits. I fed them, changed their water bottles and ... well, basically ignored them. I did muck out their cages a couple of times, but that was just to stop it getting too smelly. No wonder the rabbit made a break for freedom the moment the family returned and it was allowed out again.

What else did I get up to in my hosts absence? Debauchery? Orgies? Revising my novel? Long hours on the Internet? My great hopes for a debauched time centred round luring Frank Lunney up from his lair in Pennsylvania, but since my success ratio at luring FL anywhere remains a big fat zero, I wasn't holding my breath. Instead I went to Readercon, a local convention in nearby Worcester, Massachussetts. The con halls were full of frighteningly familiar figures, looking just like the fans back home. Except that I didn't know any of them. It was quite scary. But, in amongst the lumpen mass of fans were a high proportion of authors and publishing stars. Everyone but William Gibson. Gibson had a death in the family, and could only be turned into a virtual guest of honour. Not with multi-media modem linkups etc, but, would you believe it, by distinctly old-wave fax machine? Still, Delaney, Crowley, Kadrey, Di Fillipo, Morrow, Swanwick et al, managed to soldier on without him to struggle with questions of post modernism, transrealism, avant-pop and how to make money from SF.

I managed to team up with a few Australians for the duration. I think they wanted to make common cause with me against American culture. Perhaps it was just because we were all strangers there, but I suddenly realised how much more alien Americans seemed than Australians. This means either I'll love Australia when I get there, or I'll find it a real bore.

After the convention, Australian writer Damien Broderick decided to hang out in Boston for a couple of days with me and Sheila Lightsey (Readercon committee member and my new friend since the convention.). Sheila took us on a walking tour of Cambridge, and proved that everyone hangs out in ice cream bars by running into James Morrow there. Damien and Sheila then loudly deconstructed the SF book collection in one of the stores on Harvard Square while I tried to interest them in Irvine Welsh ("Bill Gibson thinks he's great").

Damien stayed for three days then peeled off for the Great Apple. I wizzed down to Cape Cod to try out as a waitress in a funky little diner there. Unfortunately it's probably the slowest diner on the Cape. On the first day we had no-one in for lunch so I ended up cleaning the toilets. Day two was busier and I had a chance to mess up two big tables simultaneously and wonder why they'd brought me in when they had Crystal, a cute 17 year old high school student already trained to serve. Day 3,

Crystal revealed her aspirations - she was saving up for a car, a horse, a waterbed (can't sleep on anything else, you know!) and a fridge so she could keep beer in her room. She told me she wanted to go and live in England. I told her not to bother; she'd never be able to afford all her wish list in England. Then came a rush of people wanting a mixture of breakfast and lunch. The owner boosted my confidence by chastising me for talking to Crystal earlier rather than discovering where they kept the root beer. Everything else went wrong - the decaff coffee was cold; the tea water was cold; food got taken out to the table too early (my fault apparently, even though I just grabbed what was handed to me by Crystal), someone receives the wrong sandwich, I mistook the breaded fish for a baklava and one of the customers sent his food back in a fit of pique and walked out. I was so mortified all the remaining customers give me big tips.

The following weekend, I should have gone to the Cape again, but instead Damien invited me down to New York. He had use of a publisher's apartment in Washington Heights. He also, unfortunately, had use of his dog, which was much harder to ignore than the guinea pigs. We soon grew tired of taking her to the park and encouraging her to produce poos like doting parents. So, the dog was definitely not invited when we rushed downtown on the subway (A line express) to meet New York fan Moshe Feder in a bookshop (of course). Moshe took us - inexhaustibly - all round Soho, the Village, the Bowery, the East Side etc, keeping up a running commentary on the history of the area, the buildings and the ethnic changes. Just off of Bleeker Street we met Greg Cox, a publishing type who back when he was younger and thinner blythely strolled Lilian and I through the rough streets of the Bowery with all our travel money in our pockets. Greg announced that copies of the Encyclopedia of SF are available for \$4 in a bookshop on Bleeker Street, so we rushed back up Bleeker St for about the 3rd time and I bought one (Damien and Moshe, of course, already possess this indispensable item of reference.)

For dinner we met up with Lise Eisenberg. Moshe explained that they'd been dating for 21 years. Has failure to cohabit kept the romance alive, we speculated, as Moshe kissed Lise fondly? And will they still be dating in their dotage? Lise and Moshe took us to this club, the Mercury Rooms, where Cindy Lee Berryhill, girlfriend to Paul Williams, founder of Crawdaddy etc was due to play. Sure enough, before the set we met up with Paul and a few of Cindy's fans. Cindy strolled on stage, blonde and leggy, and proceeded to tell us all about her life, punctuated by guitar, harmonica and sensuous manipulation of chewing gum. Paul Williams clearly knew every beat of her rather idiosyncratic songs, and smiled fondly as his young paramour enchanted the audience. Cindy and Paul, it turned out, were just en route to Belmont, of all places, where in fact Paul grew up. We left as an undulating flower child with stud in her navel began on a tantric Indian dirge.

Money just dribbles away in downtown New York City, osmoses out your body merely by looking at the Empire State Building, so we spent the next day in Washington Heights taking in views of the Hudson River and revisiting past scenes of canine debauchery from one of Damien's novels.

Back in Belmont, the Raggetts had returned from their holiday and it was chaos as usual. Jet lagged but game, the children screamed, itinerant Mexicans visited from next door to admire the guinea pigs and Jenny was busy planning three more books to write about the Internet.

The holiday job on the Cape lasted another few week-ends. I did get better at waiting large tables, but still a few errors slipped through, like the time I delivered a cheese and bacon burger with no burger. The chef, like the owner, was Greek and so it wasn't just a matter of handing over the orders, I had to interpret them for him too. Business didn't improve much - they were too far from the main road, though on a sunny day, lots of people would come in from the bike track. When I left, they were still waiting on a liquor licence in the hope of transforming the evening trade. I don't know if they ever got it.

I loved being out on the Cape, even though I was staying in a tent. It was just the perfect place for me - after my shift at the diner I could head straight for the sea, finding a different beach every time, normally on the bay side of the Cape where the water was warmer and the scenery more interesting, and just swim, read, watch the birds and feel happy.

By the middle of August , it was time to contemplate my next trip. I was booked to fly West to Las Vegas for Toner, a small pre-Worldcon convention, then on to LAcon, followed by three weeks in Mexico. What on earth could I pack to cover these diverse destinations? And how was I going to stand up to a fortnight of intense fannish socialising? I didn't know, but one thing was for sure, I meant to enjoy it to the full.

Have Notebook, or dossing around in Vegas and LA without a pen in my pocket

I've never considered the advantage of going to the same conventions as the current TAFF delegate before. Maybe because ordinarily this is a very deferred kind of advantage, if not a non-existent one. And I've never been at a convention with a crowd of keen Las Vegas scribes before either. But now as I sit at the keyboard and consider the empty pages in my notebook where my Toner and LAcon experiences should be, I realise I don't need to write them up as everything's been written already. Martin Tudor's done the blow by blow account in his instant TAFF bulletins, Tammy Funk's written up the bar crawl so well it feels like I was there all over again (except without the hangover), Joyce Katz recaptured the atmosphere of the Toner smoking room with her tale of the mysterious fan summoning session and Ken Forman has called me beautiful. What more do I need? (Not so rhetorical question actually. My own copies of Wild Heirs 17 and 18 would be much appreciated, you guys. What do I have to do to get back on the mailing list? Even going to your convention isn't good enough?)

Well, I could give one or two impressions, I suppose. And since Tom Springer is sturdily trying to forget the terrible time he had meeting me at the airport, where better to begin? Tom and I had never met, so anticipated some slight difficulty in picking each other out from the crowds. But then I hit on the idea of wearing my TAFF T-shirt. Surely Tom couldn't miss me in that? So I arrived in Vegas round about nine pm local time or midnight my own time. I picked up my luggage and paraded around, looking for fannish type guys, hoping one, any of them, would show some interest in me. No such luck. Okay, I thought, I'll ring his home number. Tammy was there and told me he was definitely waiting for me at the airport. Why not get him paged? I did so, and shortly after, Tom and I were talking on the airport phone, exchanging positional references. All seemed well. But, I waited and waited. The woman at the neighbouring desk kept spying out men for me, men I knew couldn't be Tom, and trying to summon them over to take me away. When none would oblige she hit on a new theory. Tom was on the shuttle bus over from the other terminal. "What other terminal?" I asked, suspiciously. "The main terminal," she said. Uh-oh! I'd thought I *was* in the main terminal. But apparently I was in some satellite branch of the airport where the charter flights come in. (Not that I knew I was on a charter flight. But there had been that odd announcement about tour parties at the end of the flight, so perhaps it was.) No wonder Tom couldn't find me. I sat down to wait for Tom to arrive from the bus, took out the copy of Attitude I'd received just before leaving for Vegas and began to read. This was a mistake. I read the editorial and the cartoons, the fanzine reviews and convention reports, and it's fortunate that there weren't any more instant "must-read" articles in the issue or I would probably have read them too. As it was, I'd been reading way too long and Tom still wasn't there. I leapt up and had him paged again. This time Tom was sounding worried. He'd been having me paged repeatedly at his end, and was beginning to believe I'd taken a taxi back, except that Tammy said I hadn't turned up there either. I explained about the charter terminal. Evidently they hadn't thought to page me there. I said I'd take the shuttle bus across as Tom's car was at the main terminal. What a relief to finally find a large guy in an olive green T-shirt waving to me as I got off the bus. Tom Springer, I presume. Well, after that, what could we do but go back to meet Tammy and relax with a few beers etc. The release of tension after the difficulties at the airport made us all quite animated and we stayed up talking much later than we should. I swear the next day I felt more jet-lagged than Martin and Helena Tudor who'd just flown all the way from England.

This friendliness and attention to one's needs, above and beyond the call of duty, was to remain a constant throughout the convention. I mean, even if it did take Tom two hours to rendez-vous with me, I was still impressed that he'd come to meet me at the airport at all. I've never been to a convention where the organisers go to meet all the guests. Or been driven around to parties and fed with home-cooked food at regular intervals. It really was more like a party than a convention, just as Tom had intended. And one where the hosts were determined we should have a good time.

Now, I have a confession to make. When I first started receiving *Wild Heirs*, back in Britain, I really didn't know quite what to make of it. Everybody involved seemed to be having a good time, sure, but I couldn't really connect. I loved the concept of a group fanzine to draw a wide circle of people into writing. This was exactly my aim with *Balloons Over Bristol* and the Bristol group. But because I knew none of the characters involved and because my fannish heritage is 70s and 80s British fandom rather than 50s US fandom I couldn't quite hack it with all this bright-eyed enthusiasm. We Brits don't trust anyone unless they're miserable, you know.

Oddly enough, considering my complaints in the past about large American fanzines, the first *Wild Heirs* I really got into was the big *Annish*. I read Tom Springer's *Manurecon* report and something seemed to click. Tom's view of the con not only held my attention, but began to get me interested in all the other people that made up Vegas fandom. Perhaps it was because he criticised some of them (nothing like the hint of gossip and discord to excite the Britfan), or perhaps it was just the quality of his writing, and yes, it has to be said his enthusiasm for fans and fandom (and for getting himself and his friends high), but by the end of the article, I felt that I wanted to meet these people. And once I began to distinguish some of the personalities behind the mass editorial presence, *Wild Heirs* became much easier to read. I think it was that issue too where I read Aileen Forman's article on friends which also made an impression. I still continued to find some of the editorial jam inane at times - but what else can you expect when people write while they're partying? I can tell you, I was really disappointed not to see an editorial jam going on when I went round the Katzes. But maybe they were doing it while I was in the pool. If I lived in Vegas, I suspect that pool would be a huge impediment to my achieving any kind of editorial prominence. I also watched with interest the self-referentiality debate between Victor Gonzalez and the Vegrants. To my mind he was asking the wrong question. It wasn't the fact that the Vegas people were writing about each other that made the fanzine inaccessible at times to the outside world, but the WAY they tended to write about each other. As if they weren't real people but cartoon fan personas who lived the complete fannish life. Not a group of friends socialising who sometimes have a great time and sometimes get stressed with each other, who have jobs to go to, watch TV and get on with life, but Fan Family who quip merrily with each other about Rotsler and Tucker and behave like they're characters in a piece of fifties fan fiction.

But what the hell, I'm notoriously bad at fifties fandom. I went to one of the Toner reading sessions and heard Richard Brandt read one of Burbee's Al Ashley stories. This seemed like a perfectly fine tale of an incompetent spaceman. Vaguely amusing, but not at all relevant to my world. Now I didn't know till people told me at LAcon that Al Ashley was a real person, a notorious fughead who deserved all the humour at his expense in these stories. They relayed this information as if this should make all the difference to my appreciation of this story, but really it didn't. Maybe you had to be there. Or maybe my unsubtle 90s brain needs a blow by blow expose of the various misdeeds of Al Ashley to get there.

Since I'm straying away from Toner - despite a lingering desire to relive all sorts of things, like staying up late gossiping with Tammy and Geri Sullivan, learning the Vegas dope rules, the moment when an awfully cool looking Bill Kunkel started a piano accompaniment to Arnie Katz's panel on numbered fandoms, driving to the Hoover Dam with Paul Williams and Cindy Lee Berryhill and my trip to the mad Pez collector with Geri, Perry Middlemiss and Robert Lichtman - I might as well segue into LAcon with the opening panel on good fan writing. I'd been thinking about this panel for weeks. What *does* make good fan writing? I knew what I liked, clever stuff with a good 90s cultural sensibility (cf Nigel Richardson & Alison Freebairn), personal writing that gives you some insight into how life works (eg Simon Ounsley), fan gossip and criticism. But was it objectively good? My taste in fan writing isn't necessarily shared by the rest of the world. Most people don't expect insight from fanzines, they just want something light and amusing to read at the breakfast table (we need look no further than the response to Plokta to confirm that.) My fannish interests seemed even more irrelevant once I was sitting on a podium with Andy Hooper, Teresa Nielsen Hayden and Dick Lynch. We had an audience of mainly familiar faces, one newcomer who obviously thought we were going to talk about SF, and a TV crew. So we spent the first five minutes of the panel signing consents forms for a section of video we knew would never be used. But Andy and Teresa being the good performers that they are, did their best to speak to this putative audience. Using the newcomer in the audience as a stooge, they attempted to explain fan writing for the uninitiated. Teresa, I think, took the tack that good fan writing was like any good writing. To back up this claim we had the NESFA publications of her own works, and Dave Langford's. Look, fanwriting can even be published in real books! She and Andy were making a good case for fan writers as the equivalent of

mainstream humourist or essayist, part of a different tradition, but just as skillful and funny, and readable by all. It was good proselytising (though predictably didn't prevent the camera losing interest) but felt fundamentally wrong to me. Not that I thought their claims necessarily untrue or exaggerated, but that it missed part of the point of fanzine writing, which is that it does appear in fanzines, and is written for a specific audience. I may even have mentioned Paul Kincaid at this point and the idea that fan writing is important because it reflects how people like us look at life. From there, it was but a short step to fifties fandom myth-making, and me questioning whether the fifties myths were valid today. Or if valid, susceptible to understanding by today's audience without translation. Well, this was where most of the audience disagreed with me, which suggests, I suppose, that American fandom is much more in touch with its heritage than we are in Britain. Hey ho. Thankfully Andy was keeping an eye on the time, and decided that we should take a break then go on to the reading section of our programme item. I was still dithering about what to read, so was glad to let Dick start. He read something from James White, I think (or was it Bob Shaw?) about a coat and a date which was amusing and insightful. Score one for the fifties, I decided. No translation required there. Then Teresa took out a copy of the tiny format fanzine Bento that she'd just received and read something very funny about computers. This gave me enough confidence to try out Nigel Richardson's rubber fetishist piece on the audience (which also had some computer jokes). Fortunately it went down well, and dovetailed neatly into the fetishism references in the piece of Dan Steffan's trip report that Andy read. ("Remember," said Andy, "when I say I, I mean Dan, and when Dan says you speaking to Andy he means me.") Again the audience was enthusiastic. Perhaps, fan-writing is more universal than I had credited. Perhaps if the TV crew had stayed, they would have begun to understand too.

Questions as to the meaning of fan writing seemed to fade in significance after a few beers in the fan lounge, even though the usual start of con excitement at seeing old friends again was slightly muted for me by the fact that I'd seen a good few of them only days previously at Toner. Later a group of about ten of us, a mixture of Toner veterans and new arrivals, ventured out along the boulevard opposite Disneyland to look for food, filtering past the Magic Lamp (or was it the Magic Carpet?) where Andy was staying, and trooping into the Chinese-Malaysian just ahead of a significant proportion of the rest of fandom. This restaurant was to become our default place to eat for the rest of the convention. It was cheap, near the convention centre, and the food was good. Frank Lunney and I even went there for breakfast, and ended up with bowls of noodles and meat porridge that were not quite anybody's idea of breakfast but certainly filled you up.

After a week of hard partying at Toner, it was difficult to get myself psyched up for more parties at LAcon. Last year I at least went home for a couple of days between Precursor and Intersection. This year I just plunged from one convention to the next with serious consequences for my stamina. All the same, I felt I had to make the effort. The first night I went off for a quick reccy of the party landscape on my own, scored some vodka from the Croatian party, then fell in with a bunch of ex-Clarionites, headed by Liz Holliday, at the Marriott bar. By the time I returned to the fan lounge all my crowd had gone. I wandered from party to party, vaguely looking for people I knew and finding that there were far more British fans at this convention than I'd ever expected. It was also the night I drank the gecko liqueur at the mystery hard-drinking party and was rewarded by my choice of liqueur (some beautiful tasting cherry brandy drink, I think). Finally I came upon Paul Williams who also didn't know where everyone was. Paul said that Cindy (who is a professional singer) had just discovered the filkers and was watching their proceedings with a certain morbid fascination. We went on to a couple more parties, ran into Steve Stiles, but couldn't find our way back to the Croatian bid party where it was rumoured that Frank, Andy, Tom Springer and Martin Tudor were hanging out. Eventually we worked out we were on the wrong patio. The fifth floor of the Hilton had about four different patio areas, with a different selection of parties on each, but all looking pretty much the same. Eventually some fan from Las Vegas who seemed to know of the Vegants, but was somewhat evasive about his connection with them, began to chat me up, so I figured it was time to head off for bed.

The following nights I was more careful to keep track of my friends. I never did get very good at distinguishing one patio area from the next (apart from the one with the swimming pool), but soon got in the swing of checking through the parties. The Croatian bid party tended to be the best for shots of hard liquor - all those Eastern European brandies and vodkas. It also managed to have a real party atmosphere with music and a high concentration of eager Croatian hosts. In fact, mostly on the basis of the parties, I switched my theoretical allegiance from the Australian bid to the Croatians. It

wasn't just that they were generous with their liquor and the Australians mean with their wine, it was more that they were showing such enthusiasm and clearly had such a solid backing of people wanting to work on the con that it seemed a pity not to let them try. Besides, Croatia is much closer to home (for me) than Australia. But the Americans were having none of it. Supposing there was still a war on? Supposing the Croatians weren't up to the task? Fate forbend that we should have to exist for a year without a worldcon.

Most of the parties, though, were much the same as each other. The same crap food and the same weak American beer. Okay, Frank and I did eventually find the Japanese party where they were giving out head tie bands and Japanese women were singing along with the anime in what appeared to be a gruesome hybrid of filking and karaoke. But on the whole, the Philcon party blurred into the Boston in 2001, grew mixed up with the Seattle in whenever, until the only sane course was to go back to the fan room for some decent beer (Geri Sullivan, the fan room organiser, had used her budget wisely, and turned out to have large quantities of microbrewery beer stashed away for fan room use.) or retire to a nearby room for a sidebar with some combination of Frank, Andy, Robert Lichtman, Michelle Lyons, Paul and Cindy, or Steve Stiles for some of the more interesting conversations of the convention.

Having gone through my toughest programme item on the first day - though I wasn't particularly looking forward to getting up at ten on the last morning of the convention to talk about D West - I thought I could relax. Okay, I was going to do a panel on British fanzines, but with Andy and Martin to keep me company that wouldn't be difficult, and I'd agreed to help out on the fan fund auction, but that was nothing to lose sleep over. But then I went and volunteered to be in Andy Hooper's latest fannish play, Fanotchka. I didn't intend to volunteer. I deliberately kept my mouth shut when Andy said he was casting, even though I had always quite fancied reading in one of Andy's plays. But, it was bound to require lots of work rehearsing, even if we were only reading from the script, I reminded myself, and what if I messed up? Meanwhile, Andy wandered around, saying things like: "Barkenhorst! I need a Barkenhorst" or "What's happened to my Fanotchka.". But by the end of the evening it was too much for me. Andy was slumped on a sofa, counting through the parts cast and looking depressed. Some woman he had in mind for one of the parts was nowhere to be found, and the words just came out. "I'll do it." So, the next day I joined up with the rest of the cast to rehearse. There was a good atmosphere with people like Paul and Cindy, and Ken and Aileen Forman involved and a really amusing script for us to get our teeth into, but, as the rehearsals progressed I grew more and more nervous. Andy wasn't just wanting us to read so we vaguely knew the text, but had certain set pieces that required some skill to perform properly, and had definite ideas on pacing and other facets of performance that he was expecting from his cast. When it came to my turn to read, I thought I sounded so clumsy and English compared to the rest, but Andy's only comment was that I had to be much louder. My character had two main scenes, one near the start and one towards the end and in the second one she had to address half her remarks at normal volume to Ken Forman's character, and the rest at top volume to some imaginary masqueraders on the other side of the room. I was afraid that my voice simply didn't have the volume range to pull this off. Why oh why had I volunteered, I thought as we broke up at the end of the rehearsal. The last thing I wanted to do was mess it up for Andy. I tried to forget about it, in between sneaking back to my room to practice shouting. But forgetting about it wasn't easy, not when I was in the same dinner party with Andy, who I'm sure was also worrying about the play. Then we went to the programme room for final arrangements, and I saw that tech had got us some mikes. Saved! Most of the cast were happier performing without mikes, but for me it made all the difference. I could stop worrying about being heard and get on with doing the part. It was really great fun. The audience were laughing in all the right places and getting into it, and as a performer, I was getting a real buzz out of being involved. In fact, everyone was playing much better than in rehearsal. At the end, several people said that the English accent really worked for the part. I guess it provided a useful contrast to the other voices. So, after all, it had been worth volunteering. I floated around for the rest of the evening on that convention high you get, if you're lucky, after some difficult programme item comes off.

The next day I had to do my stint as fan room host. The theme for my two hours was Brits at the Bar. I kept telling any British fans I met to come along, but wasn't expecting a great turnout as it was scheduled for between six and eight on the night of the Hugos when most people would be out eating. True enough, the fan lounge was very quiet. Robert Lichtman who was doing the shift before mine had abandoned any attempt at running a FWA party and was preparing to go out to eat. Frank showed every sign of joining him, even though we'd only just eaten lunch. Still, I stalled Frank long

enough to get him to move me some supplies of cooled beer into the fan room. This was when we discovered the true riches in Geri's store room. The fridge was stashed to the gunnels with cheese, pâtés, dips, frozen meals, cold meats and other delicacies; big boxes next to the fridge held enough chips and other snack biscuits to supply a whole patio's worth of parties, and the beer stocks looked like they'd represent a challenge even to Martin Tudor. Presiding over it all was Geri's assistant, Don Fitch, who, as far as Frank and I could tell was actually living in the stock room. Once when we came in he was just heating up his dinner in the microwave. Frank and Robert went off to eat (in the Chinese-Malaysian, bien sûr, though they could just as easily have eaten in the fan lounge stock cupboard) while I tried to interest people in beer. Most parties had stickers or give-aways of some sort, in keeping with their theme (the best being Spike and Tom Becker's beach party where they even gave out a supply of beach postcards to write to our friends), but I decided to concentrate on beer. It seemed suitably in keeping with the spirit of British fandom. Martin Tudor who had been around earlier, doing his bit for beer consumption, had disappeared to enjoy his pre-Hugo nerves in peace, but Leeds fan Mike Ford turned up and I enlisted him as my co-host. Each time anyone came in, I asked them if they would like to be an honorary Britfan and offered them some beer. Mike and I even managed to dig up a bottle or two of British beers to foster the illusion. Business was slow, but by the time Frank and Robert came back, there was still a solid core of people in the room, relaxing and chatting. Geri had said I could close the fan room to go to the Hugos, but I didn't want to chuck everyone out. So, Mike Ford, hero of the hour, agreed to stay on and keep it open.

The Hugos seemed pretty low key. At least, there were no lines to get in and plenty of seats. I really only wanted to see Martin and Perry Middlemiss, as fan fund winners, present the fan awards. And, of course, see if Andy would win anything. He kept assuring us he wouldn't, but you never knew. "It's the British block vote," Frank said. "They'll swing it for Dave Langford again." "There isn't any British block vote," I said irritably. All the same, Langford won for both fanzine and fan writer. One of his acceptance speeches, delivered by Martin Hoare, suggested cordially that the Americans might like to consider voting for someone else in future. Martin Tudor managed not to look a nervous wreck as he came up twice, once to accept Dave's award and once to announce a couple of the winners. His brevity in this department was a pleasant contrast to Connie Willis's verbosity. Perry, being a good Australian, managed to make a couple of jokes and look completely relaxed. How do they do it?

Back in the fan lounge, Mike had done a good job and the room was looking lively. We waited for Andy to get back from the Hugos and went to hit the parties once more. ("Hugo losers party?" said Andy. "No thanks. Been there, done that.") Some time during the course of the evening, Andy and I were discussing the desirability of not getting up at ten the next morning to talk about D West, but didn't know what to do about our fellow panellists Patrick and Teresa Nielsen Hayden. Then, at just that moment, in a bout of almost Toner-like fan summoning, Patrick and Teresa walked into the fan room. It didn't take much persuasion to convince them that they didn't want to get up at ten either. To assuage our consciences, we expressed a vague intention of convening a round table discussion on West later in the day, but as far as I know this didn't happen.

And so, there it was, all over bar the clearing up. Everyone seemed to be leaving on the Monday, so by Monday night, the parties were distinctly lacking in lustre. Even the fan lounge was dismantled, and what was left of the food, chips and beer taken out to the comfy chairs in the foyer where a circle of fans partied unconvincingly to the accompaniment of farewell hugs and smothered yawns. I couldn't believe I'd gone through almost 12 nights of consecutive partying and socializing. I couldn't believe I was about to head off to Mexico. Where would I ever find the energy? And what would I make of Mexico after so much non-stop interaction with fans?



Mexico : Into The City

Casa Gonzalez

Before going to Mexico people keep telling me the same three things - don't drink the water, don't get ice in your drinks and don't eat any fruit or salads. So, I arrive at Casa Gonzalez in Mexico City, straight from the airport, to find my travel companion Sheila informing me that she was so thirsty that she just guzzled down a whole lot of water. Oh great! Later, we go across to the dining room to eat, our stomachs fortified with the recommended dose of pepto-bismol, and the first thing they offer me is a glass of water. "Is it safe to drink?" I ask. "Oh yes," says a smiling-faced woman from Nashville. "Everything's safe here. Y'all could even drink the water in the rooms." Later I'm to wonder if she said safe or saved, but at the time I accept her verdict. And shortly thereafter a slice of water melon. That's rule number 3 down the drain too. But if you're going to trust them on water, you might as well trust them on the rest. I look around for some ice to put in my margarita.

Casa Gonzalez is a Spanish-style family pension run by Señor Gonzalez, grandson of the original owner. Here we all eat en famille with his son, his son's fiancée and any guests too recently arrived to realise how expensive the place is (by Mexican standards). Our fellow guests on this occasion are two women from Nashville and a tanned couple on their way back to San Francisco after a fortnight on the beach at Zihuatanejo. The women from Nashville don't stop smiling throughout the meal, and soon they are telling señor Gonzalez about their latest good deed. They happened to go into a shop and saw a woman crying. "We didn't know why we went that way till then," says one. "She was so lonely and her husband's in hospital," says the other. "It was just meant to be," concludes the first. Señor Gonzalez nods sagely. He has his own fund of "meant to be" stories. One visitor predicted the exact date of an earthquake, except wrong by one year. Someone else predicted he would win the lottery next time he returned to Mexico City. And next time he was staying at Casa Gonzalez, he died, and in amongst his possessions was the winning lottery ticket. Outside the house, a deep echoing roll of thunder crashes. I also notice that the room and I are not quite in equilibrium. I'm experiencing strange waves of dizziness. Altitude sickness? Or the effects of margarita on pepto-bismol? After a while it calms down, and I find that the Nashville missionary sisters are relating their experiences in distributing second hand spectacles to the poor. "We leave out a pile of sunglasses too so that everyone can have something, even if their eyesight is good." Señor Gonzalez points out, quite unnecessarily it seems to me, that not all who step through his portals are as good as they. One time a woman needed bailing out after a fight in a bar at two in the morning, he continues. Her husband was woken up and told that she had been taken to hospital with a cut hand and now needed someone to vouch for her before she could be released. "Oh dear, oh dear," he said. Then went back to sleep. "I bet she had something to say to him in the morning," says Sheila. "Don't you mean he had something to say to her?" suggests Señor Gonzalez gently. I begin to wish the room were still swaying. The missionary sisters excuse themselves to go off in the rain to make their hospital visit.

Meanwhile, Sheila goes to ring her friend Doyka, a Cuban currently living in Mexico City. It turns out that Doyka knows Casa Gonzalez too - it's where she met the American she was to marry and then, later, be deserted by. Such is the fatefulness of Casa Gonzalez.

Casa Gonzalez feels so European, particularly after almost a fortnight of identikit American hotels. Very Spanish with its little courtyards, brightly coloured tiles, and formal dining room, complete with heavy blue and white glazed crockery and stained glass window. Likewise, I can't quite convince myself I'm not in Paris or Barcelona as I take my first walk outside the next morning. Not quite warm enough for Spain, too much tropical vegetation for France, but all the same, a similar feel to the streets and squares. The only thing that truly convinces me I'm in a city I've never been to before are the little green VW taxi cabs. When you look at the waiting traffic and see only coloured nobby cars, you know you're in another world.

Ancient Magics

We walk as far as Chapultepec Park, but are firmly marched away from the ornamental main gates by a man in uniform. Maybe this is something to do with the visit of the Spanish prime-minister, we speculate. We have to walk down the underpass instead. The strong, rancid smell of cooking tortillas from the various market stalls is almost too much for me, the huevos rancheros from breakfast sitting

all soggy and greasy on my stomach (breakfast eggs in Mexico City seem to come swimming in sauce, we soon discover.) . We walk along a busy road, opposite the main part of the park, heading for the Museum of Anthropology. Already I feel thirsty and I'm acutely conscious that I can't just drink some water. What will I do for three weeks in Mexico, I wonder? The city seems so noisy, threatening and polluted around me. Even buying a bottle of soda doesn't calm my doubts. The bottle is dirty, and even though the seller has wiped its neck for me (or maybe because he's wiped the neck?), the suspicion of instant contagion lingers on. But the museum is reassuring. The fountain and public area in front of it, and the style of architecture remind me strongly of somewhere I visited in Brussels. Inside, after a few hours with the Mayan, Toltec, Dolmtec, Aztec,, Zapotec and various other pre-Columbian civilisations with Xs in their names, I no longer feel threatened, just amazed, bemused and strongly in need of a simple layman's guide to pre-Conquest Mexico.

That evening, Doyka turns up to take us to the Zocalo. She has her mother with her, a tiny Cuban woman named Delta. ("Like the airline," explains Doyka, enigmatically. Apparently everyone in the family has names beginning with D.) Doyka claims she has brought her mother to help us find our way around, since Delta's been living in the city for five years or is it six months? (The truth was lost in the translation, I think) But it soon becomes clear that her mother's real role is as some kind of good luck charm. Doyka suggests a destination, spins her mother around a bit to see which way she faces, then ask the nearest passerby how to get there. On the Metro, it's quicker to follow the signs than to wait for Doyka and her mother to finish arguing over which direction to take.

Out in the Zocalo, the huge central square, I'm struck by the latest truth about what I'm reminded of by Mexico City. This time it's Austria. Look, see, there's the onion domes of a bloody Baroque cathedral. Just another reminder of what you get from being a Spanish colony, I think, remembering the endless baroque extravaganzas I encountered on my trip to Austria. However, in Mexico City the natives are fighting back. The remains of the Aztec temple formerly on the site have been uncovered, and the native dancers are drumming and dancing in the Zocalo. At first they look like a tourist attraction, but as the night proceeds their rituals become more ceremonial and pagan. They make dedications at the five points of the Aztec compass (the fifth is the centre) and squat together in a circle to perform some ritual with food. All this begins to freak Sheila out. "They're drumming on the old temple site and the cathedral is sinking!" she says. Indeed, the cathedral has a distinct list as if it's about to be riven in two by some eldritch force, ready to unleash the Mexican eagle with the serpent in its claws.

We go up to a bar in an old colonial hotel overlooking the Zocalo. There are the same azuelitos tiles as at Casa Gonzalez and an old fashioned style lift. "It's a Great Western hotel now," says Sheila. The Zocalo below is all movement and light. Glittering red, green and white decorations for the forthcoming independence day celebrations, illuminated profiles of heroes of the revolution, a huge flag in the centre, long balloons and toy parachutes being batted into the air, and, constantly, the sound of whistles blowing as if there's one endless office party going on below.

After we've finished our drinks, we eschew the hotel's overpriced food and go to eat in a cafe full of Mexicans, where I discover how to deal with tamales, and Sheila continues to complain that the salsa isn't hot enough (she's been practising too hard at eating chillies in advance of the trip, and now even Mexico tastes tame to her.)

Chez Frida

The next day, we meet up with Doyka again, at Tasquefia, the Southern transport hub for the city. We want to go to Coayacan to see the houses of Trotsky, who spent his last years in Mexico City, and Frida Kahlo, Mexico's most famous woman artist. Maybe Doyka's mother really was a good luck charm, because without her none of the buses seem ready to go to Coyoacan. We tramp up and down the bus yard, being directed this way and that, even climbing into one camionette, only to be told it didn't go there after all. Finally, we give up and flag down one of the omnipresent green VW taxis.

Coyoacan has a fresher, more gentle feel to it than central Mexico city. More like a country town, than part of one of the biggest cities in the world. Frida Kahlo's house is down a quiet shady street

with high walls and big gardens. As we wander around it, I wonder what Frida Kahlo would have made of having her love notes to Diego Rivera (Mexico's most famous male artist) on display. But then the whole house, with its blue walls and model Aztec pyramid in the garden, looks like it was designed as an objet d'art. Frida clearly had an intense personal life, but perhaps, like many artists, it wasn't a particularly private one. Her 'journal intime', full of sketches and stream of consciousness text, is now on sale to the general public. As a child, Frida had this fantasy of going through a little door traced on her bedroom window and meeting another version of herself who danced without her feet touching the ground. Later there is the picture of the two Fridas, connected but not the same. Even as a child, before the road accident that crippled her, Frida had polio and was fantasising about getting away from her own body. Elsewhere in her diary is the poignant page showing Frida with pins through her body and the caption ALAS ROTAS. Alas, broken, I think, then look more closely. The dialogue above reads (in Spanish) "Come with me" "No, I can't" "Why not?" ALAS ROTAS. Broken wings. Just as poignant are all the pictures from 1954, the year of her death at the age of 47. The picture of her held doll-like in the huge hands of Marx, called El Marxismo dara Salud a los Enfermos (Marxism will give health to the sick) and the picture of the vibrant water melons with the caption Vida la Vida (Live life).

Given her Communist leanings, it comes as no surprise to hear that Frida had an affair with her neighbour Trotsky. The house where Trotsky was murdered is only a few blocks away from Frida's and is kept just as when he lived there, down to the clothes in the closet, the shelves of books and Earl Grey tea in the kitchen. "What books do you think Trotsky read for light relief?" Sheila asks as we survey the bookshelves. Most of them contain copies of his works in various language, and other Russian political works. "This Willa Cather," I decide after a while. There doesn't seem much else you could imagine relaxing with on a hot summer day. The guide book describes the house as a fortress, but to me it looks like the perfect country retreat for the writer - a room to study in, a room for reading, a peasant-style dining room with warm, yellow decor and a leafy garden. Maybe it wasn't fortress enough. After all, the assassin did get Trotsky in the end.

The Virgin of Guadalupe

Sheila's offbeat choice of tourist excursion for Sunday is the basilica built where the Virgin Mary allegedly appeared to an indigenous Christian convert in 1531. Suspiciously, this miraculous event occurred on the very same hill where the locals used to worship the earth goddess Tonantzin before the arrival of the Spanish priests. However, this home-grown miracle, featuring a brown-skinned Virgin, speaking the Indian convert's native language seemed to keep everyone happy and ensured her adoption as patron deity of the Republic of Mexico, and protector of thousands of Mexican bus drivers. Sheila's interest, she explains, is in manifestations of the Goddess in modern society, and places of spiritual power, not Christianity. "And, please don't get me started on St. Paul," she adds. (I don't.) I imagine it'll be some big church, which we'll dutifully walk around, admiring the statues or whatever, then go back to Central Mexico City for some lunch. I guess I should have known better. After all, I've been to Lourdes (another of the Virgin's headline venues)

Even in the Metro to Basilica it's obvious that rather more people are travelling the same way as us than can be accounted for by normal Sunday devotions. It's also obvious from their dress that they're up to something sacerdotal. At least, I can't imagine why else a grown woman would wear a suit made from the kind of pink shiny material I last remember from children's birthday parties when I was age 5. Outside the metro, the street, it being Mexico, is one huge market. But along with the usual array of tacos, freshly squeezed juices, dolls, hats and Mexican flags were stalls full of religious paraphanelia - pictures, statues, medallions, rosaries. "Ooh!" squeals Sheila, "I want them!"

But first we decide to follow the crowds to the Basilica, a street full of jostling families, some dressed up for the occasion, little girls in their white, frilly communion dresses, some just casual. We perform our good deed for the day by picking up a watch dropped unnoticed on the street and run after the couple who dropped it. Clearly the saintliness of Casa Gonzalez is starting to rub off on us.

At the end of the street is the old church, and next to it a new basilica in the modern concrete style of the Catholic cathedrals in Bristol or Liverpool, though much bigger. We make our way into the Basilica, where unsurprisingly, Mass is in progress (they probably run continuous performances all

day Sunday) and the building is full of people, some of them trying to make their way through the crowd on their knees. At least they're ahead of the couple in the plaza outside whom we observe kneeling their way shuffle by painstaking shuffle towards the Basilica.

Despite these exhibitions of religious fervour, Sheila is looking disappointed. Where is the museum? The shrine? The conveyor belt taking pilgrims past the sacred relics of the peasant's cloak? "Those people have a map!" she says, eagerly pointing at a couple just leaving the Basilica. "Where can we get one?" "That's not a map," I point out. "It's a prayer sheet or church bulletin." Even at a distance I can recognise the style from many years of exposure to such artefacts. Fortunately before she rushes off to accost random churchgoers, I spot another plaza with another concrete modern building in it. "Look, I bet that's the visitor's centre." It isn't. It turns out to be a registry office for births and marriages, but next to it, in an older stone building, is the museum. But already our eyes are being drawn further onwards, to steps leading up the hill. We continue to follow the crowds, nuns, fathers with babies wrapped up in blankets and wielded like battering rams, little Indian children being incredibly well behaved. "No-one's on their knees," complains Sheila. "They should be climbing the hill on their knees." Gradually views of the city emerge below us, urban sprawl and mountains hazy with smog. Directly below is a tent city, or rather, we realise, another market, with a huge yellow tower rearing up in the middle, emblazoned with the letters WC. "Tianguis!" says Sheila, happily, using the Spanish American word for market.

First, though, we finish our climb to the top of the hill where, predictably, there is a little chapel, also with a mass in progress and a crowd of eager pilgrims, pushing their way to the front. We're just looking at a mural of the Virgin appearing to Juan Diego, and commenting that he has a moustache (traditionally grown to prove that you have Spanish blood), when Sheila darts forwards. She's spotted an old lady on her knees and proceeds to help her clear a path through the surrounding bodies. Suddenly it doesn't seem as unlikely as I first thought that Sheila wants to get a job as a crossing lady. Another good deed successfully accomplished, we walk back down from the chapel by another route and pass the rose garden, memorial to the miraculous roses that accompanied the first appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe. "Still tended by heavenly hands?" suggests Sheila, who insists on having her photo taken in front of the garden. "I doubt it," I say. "Well, maybe just nuns then," she agrees reluctantly. "Or saintly persons from Nashville." Below the rose garden is a big memorial to the Virgin, a waterfall with life-sized statues of the Virgin attended by a train of villagers. Somehow with the help of water, cacti and roses, the monument contrives not to be too tacky. "At least we've managed to pick a tourist spot that's full of Mexicans rather than gringos," I say, looking at the predominantly Indian family crowd. Down at the bottom of the steps was yet another church, covered in the warm-coloured azuelitos tiles of the area. In the museum we spend a while looking at the walls covered with thank you cards to the Virgin, painted by local artists. Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo used to collect them. Most of them depict local lifestyles, scenes of sickbeds with details of household furnishing, hospital scenes, or, more adventurously, pictures of motor cycles, sinking ships or even earthquakes. And under each was the written message of thanks by the survivors of the illness or their families, mainly dating back to the 20s and 30s.

Beyond the basilica area, we step straight out into the market where people are crying their wares at great volume, the words running into each other so that the only bit I can make out from the torrent is "un peso". Now is the chance for Sheila to buy her religious souvenirs. For my part, I'm not quite far enough away from my Catholic upbringing to find ironical delight in illuminated altars, religious plaques and garish statues, however tacky. But it's quite amusing to wander beneath a lorry load of suspended crucifixes, looking a bit like planes in a holding pattern over LA airport. I wonder how many of these they shift on a good Sunday? (Not to mention a Good Friday). Meanwhile, Sheila is busy trying out those pictures where you get a double-image according to how you hold it up to the light, allowing the Virgin of Guadalupe to be paired off with Jesus or maybe the Pope. But Sheila isn't having any truck with such patriarchal bedfellows and eventually emerges triumphant with one that gives two views of the Virgin, one full face and one next to the Basilica. I have to admit that for 30 pesos (about £3), the pictures are worth it for the frames alone. Then she finds some little boxes with holy scenes that light up, and has to buy those too, followed shortly by a bag to pack them all in (our only attempt at bargaining, for the bag, results in some free griddle-baked biscuits that Sheila doesn't even like.)

Now for the big question, where to eat? There are lots of stalls in the market, but none obviously cleaner or safer than the rest. The day before, we'd found a fine deli counter selling tacos and quesadilla with one's choice of filling, but here there's nothing so well set-up, nor any handy semi-native friends like Doyka to help with interpretation. Eventually we chose a place on the basis that it has a sunny outside deck, and some customers (always an essential consideration when choosing where to eat in Mexico). The problem is, once seated outside, what to ask for? I notice that the people at the other end of the table are eating some reddish coloured rolls, that I've seen around before, so I point to them, and ask to have one with mushrooms and cheese. Sheila opts for tacos with cheese and flor de calabaza (some kind of edible sunflower, I think), and of course, the inevitable salsa. It takes a bit longer to sort out drinks - I'm still pronouncing 'cerveza' with the Castillian lisp that works so well in Spain, but somehow doesn't go down so well here, so it takes a couple of tries before anything arrives, while Sheila has to scrutinise most of their soft drink selection before resorting to a coke. The 'Pombazo', as my bread is called, is delicious - bread grilled with chilli on the top, hence the colour - and I try not to let Sheila's comments about mushrooms not necessarily being safe worry me. Sheila likes her taco so much she orders a second. Mexico can provide some mellow moments, even in the middle of the bustle of the market. I even manage to pay without running out of appropriate change. On the way out we admire the huge vats of soup, where if you watch them being stirred long enough you can see the heads and other parts of animals emerge.

Signs and Portents

On the Metro on the way back I fall to admiring the pictograms used to designate each station on the metro map, like a rosary for El Rosario or waves for Salto del Agua. Then I get it. They're not just there to be cute, but are a serious system to help the illiterate navigate their way round the network. The pictogram appears next to the name on each of the station signs, above ground and below, and all the different lines are colour coded as well as numbered.

The next day we walk down to Plaza St Domingo where all the printers hang out. Their old-fashioned letter press equipment is amazing enough, but what really gets me is the typists. Men (mostly men) sitting outside, at electric typewriters, typing letters and documents to the dictation of their clients. So that's what it's like to be a scribe! I entertain a brief fantasy of setting up there with a typewriter of my own, then decide my Spanish isn't good enough. "One o'clock!" announces Sheila. "Time for el Vegetariano." Her favourite restaurant from a previous visit. It's our last day in Mexico City and we want to cram in a Comida Corrida (somewhat akin to the French "Menu du Jour") before we return to our hotel to get a taxi over to Doyka's house where we are going to rest up before catching the night bus to Oaxaca. My feelings for Mexico City have gradually changed over the days as I've seen its different faces. It's not just the breathless, rather overwhelming place that I first encountered, not just an amalgam of European cities I've known, but something softer, more captivating, the city of artists and believers, of miracles and old magics, of smiling people trying to understand what you want, dauntless salesman who will nonetheless still stop and talk to you, and of foods that will delight rather than just make you ill. I know there is crime, I've seen all the different kinds of uniformed police and soldiers on the streets, seen the beggars, whole families of beggars with young children in tow, but even so, Mexico is beginning to get to me. And, I think, if I can start to love Mexico City with all its faults, then I know I'm going to enjoy the rest of the country. Anyhow, I have two and a half weeks to find out. Suddenly it doesn't seem long enough.

The Mexican trip was where my notebook began to fill up quite rapidly, but there hasn't been time to transcribe most of the stories yet, so the rest of the Mexican experience will have to wait till the next issue. Suffice to say that I was very taken with the place, and I suspect my North American road trip rather suffered from the comparison. As there were less notes on the road trip, these have been written up in full (well, I had to get something finished!). Also this issue seemed like the right place to put them since this is what I've been up to for the past six months, getting to know the US of A.

The Great American Road Trip

...is one of those concepts with a mythology all of its own. So many books, so many movies. A big country waiting to be discovered. Man and his car against nature in the middle of the desert. Highway 61 revisited. Resonances that made me determined not to leave America without doing a road trip. Ideally I should have driven coast to coast, but there wasn't time for that. I had friends in Texas I wanted to see (Mike Christie and Sherry Coldsmith), so I decided that would be my target. Boston is pretty far north, so I took advantage of hospitality from Frank Lunney and Dan & Lynn Steffan to plan a circular trip starting and ending in Washington.

12th October

Taste of DC, a street festival with food and music is on and it looks like my desire to go round museums in Washington is going to be thwarted once more. It's a weird morning. We were all up late last night after a 2nd Friday party at Ted White's. Dan offered me some of his whisky, saying it was so smooth it never gave him a hangover. Naturally I didn't need a second invitation! And, sure enough, I don't really feel hung over, just slightly light-headed from lack of sleep. Frank and I go out to Bread & Circuses, an upmarket green supermarket. Frank's after some wheat grass to drink. "Wheat grass?" I ask, bemused. "You drink grass?" "Yeah, sure. It gives you energy." And then, more predictably. "It makes you real high." We eat our way round Bread & Circuses. Clam Chowder. Herb stuffed chicken. Various breads. It's all just there for tasting. Taste of BC, I joke. Then we go to the juice bar, and Frank orders six shots of wheat grass. Two to drink there and four to go. After some hesitation, I order one for myself. We go and sit at the bar, and Frank jokes around with the retarded guy sitting next to him, and the woman pressing the wheat grass. I just watch as the grass goes through the machine, exuding a vivid green juice which looks and smells like crushed grass. Frank knocks back his double and orders another. I get my glass. "Is that a single?" Frank asks. It's the same size as his double. The woman just smiles. "It's a double. But don't worry about it." Frank's schmoozing is having a good effect. There a kind of party atmosphere, like we're all at some liquor bar. "You have had this stuff before?" checks one of the other servers, noting the size of Frank's order. "You'll be bouncing off the wall." I sip my grass cautiously. Yes, it does taste how I would imagine grass to taste. But it's sweet and not unpleasant. "Yeah, this is good," I say.

On the way back, Frank asks me if I'm feeling any buzz from it yet. "A tightening round the head?" he suggests. "Not really." Back at Dan and Lynn's I do start to feel something. A sort of dizziness, and the beginnings of a headache. After a while I realise what's happening. The energy rush of the wheat grass has just encountered the inertial force of the whisky in my system and is cleaning it up. I have to go outside for some air. Unfortunately, everyone is raring to get downtown for the Taste of DC. I know I'd be all right if I could just stay outside till the rush wears off, but I have my doubts about a car journey. On the other hand, Indie band RePublica whom I want to see are on fairly soon, and we're only taking a short car ride to the Metro system. I decide to risk it, but make sure I'm next to a window. The journey's not too bad apart from the circular drive up the car park ramp and the seemingly endless debate over the optimal car parking space. I get out of the car as quickly as I can, feeling faint and slightly sick, but find if I put my head down and take a few deep breaths then I feel a lot better. Strong stuff this wheat grass. "You'll come down off it soon," says Frank, not entirely sympathetically, as we head on over to the metro. I distract myself by babbling on about the Mexico City metro. After a while I realise I'm going to be all right. By the time we're out in downtown DC all I have is a headache and a slight sore feeling in my stomach.

The crowds are out in force. Any vision of wandering from stall to stall, picking up food as it takes one's fancy is dispelled by the huge lines everywhere. There's also a queue for the vouchers used as currency at the festival. We wonder if it's going to be worth it, but Lynn and her friend Lauren volunteer to stand in line while we go on to check out RePublica. They promise they'll meet us there. I have no objections. Out on the open air stage on 18th Street, a black haired woman is leaping up and down, looking as if she's in the middle of a workout. The style of singing is reminiscent of Hazel O'Connor or other female singers of the early '80s, but the backing is more 90s instrumental than punk. It's a good mixture, and I groove along to it, largely ignoring my headache, particularly when I discover I know their hit single. The set ends and still no sign of Lynn and Lauren. Surely they can't still be in line, we think. We wander back down the stands looking for them, check out the voucher line, then head back to 18th and the stage. "Shit! Thirty dollars of vouchers just wasted," says Frank, pessimistically. But no, Lynn's waiting there, with beer for us. Frank goes to get some food and comes back with fried calamari and a tofu dish. Lauren has turned

up with something too, and we all begin to pass around food. Fortunately the lines further down the street are not so bad. A couple of stands just off the main drag have no queues at all. We try some Malaysian noodles and African chicken. Then we go and check out the second stage where Stanley Clarke are playing. We only catch the end of the set which is a pity as they turn out to be at the rock fusion end of the jazz spectrum that I like. They start getting people up on stage to sing with them. The first volunteer, a black woman really belts it out, then a black guy hams up a number something shocking. Beyond the stage I can see the civic buildings of Washington. The sun is shining, and I get one of those increasingly rare sense of wonder shocks of really being there. Washington. A long way from home. Out in a street festival. Even my headache has gone, and everything feels cool.

I decide I want to go down and see the AIDs quilt which has been laid out on the Mall for the day. All the others have seen it before, and say they'll just be folding it up by the time I get down there, but I still want to go. I've heard so much about it, and it might be my only chance. It's only a five or ten minute walk down to the Mall, but even as I approach I hear a voice over the speakers saying that the quilt is closing and they will now be folding it up. All the same, there are still plenty of pieces of the quilt on display when I get down there and people walking round, looking. I can see why it's such an emotional experience. So many personal tributes to people who have died, names of loved ones, little souvenirs sewn into the quilt, jokes and tributes. The only thing that keeps me from being too personally hit is that nearly all the people are male and about ten years or so older than me. If they were all my contemporaries then it would be so much worse. No doubt there are segments of the quilt where they are. I walk around in that mellow slanting late afternoon sunlight, feeling both melancholic and uplifted. When most of the quilt pieces have been put away, I help in folding one, lifting a corner and laying it down gently in the centre. Then I walk away, back towards the bustle of "Taste of DC", glad that I had made this little pilgrimage.

13th October

We all go out to a diner for brunch. Dan wants to ask me what he refers to as a stupid question : "What do you dislike most about America?" It doesn't seem that stupid to me, but I'm temporarily stumped. I'd just been holding forth on the cramped feeling of Britain, or some such hobby horse, and seem to have a head full of criticism of my own country, but not much about America. Maybe, because I've actively chosen to spend these months in America, I'm not treating it very critically. Or maybe I just don't feel it's up to me to tell Americans what's wrong with their country. Sure, I've discussed American society plenty with Jenny Raggett who is here for two years, not out of choice, and has two children in American schools. There are plenty of aspects of American life that effect her directly and very deeply, but so far I'm only a spectator in these. Likewise, the Australians over for Readercon seemed to be busily comparing the incidentals of American life rather negatively to their own, but then they would no doubt have had the same or even worse to say about Britain. So, all I can come up with, at this point in time, is the TV commercials. This I can feel fairly passionate about after an evening watching TV. Ultimately the irritation factor of seeing the same ads over and over again gets too high. Particularly in someone else's house where you can't flick channels or get up and do the washing up or some other useful household chore in the interim. Frank laughs. "Is that all you can come up with after four months?" Well, yes. Deep thought leads me to add in the TV news. It does annoy me the way there's no news on the American TV news programmes. It's all road accidents, parades, maybe a community development at the local hospital, weather, more weather after the commercials to keep you watching, and sport. If you're really lucky you might get a sound bite of Clinton or Dole. To me, this is more like the local news on British TV than a proper news programme. In fact, the only way to get any world news on American TV is to watch the Spanish language channels. Admittedly you get a bias towards military coups and drug smuggling, but at least it's real news.

14th October

I think of a few more things I don't like about America while I'm driving along. The food packers in the supermarket who shove your food into a new paper bag before you've time to reuse the old. The front page of the newspapers that always continue the story on page 8. But it doesn't seem all that significant really. By early afternoon I'm coming up towards the mountains and decide to detour into one of the many state parks to try out the Skyline Drive. The park is very obviously catering to the American car culture, offering view stops approximately every two minutes, so people don't even need to get out of their vehicles. But, I have to admit, it is really well set up. You get a map, trails,

signs, visitors' centres, restrooms, and even hotels should you wish to stay the night. The day is a bit hazy so the views aren't quite as fabulous as they must be when it's clear, but the number of prospects of mountain peaks, valleys and forests is so impressive I have to keep stopping to look. All along the roadside are trees, their leaves just starting to turn, mostly yellows, with a few reds. It's so beautiful that I don't care that I'm not making much progress. I continue driving through the park till almost nightfall, then head out to find my first motel.

15th October

I cross the Appalachians into West Virginia, which certainly seems to live up to its sobriquet of "The Mountain State." The colours on the hillsides are breathtaking. I guess the leaves change faster up in the mountains. When I stop at the post office on the far side of the mountains, the lady in charge has a lilting Southern accent. Further on, in Elkin, for lunch, the people in the cafe are discussing the case of the seven year old who banned from school for alleged sexual harassment (i.e. kissing a girl). "Children aren't allowed to be children no more," they conclude, reminiscing on their own activities at that age. On the way from Elkin to I.79, I switch on the radio, and all I can find is one country music station. Yes, I think, I'm in the South all right.

16th October

I decide to drive through Lexington, Kentucky, just to see what the other Lexington (i.e. not Lexington, Massachusetts) is like. Bypassing towns on the Interstate is faster, but doesn't give you any feel for a place. Driving through a city is always an adventure. I love driving on the Interstate through the centre of Boston. I've even been known to enjoy driving through London. Just so long as I vaguely know where I'm going and it's not the rush hour. Well, Lexington, KY, doesn't look so different from Lexington, Mass. It has a similar well-tended, middle-class air about it, but the houses are mostly stone, not timber, and obviously Lexington in Kentucky is much the bigger place. Though not so big that I'm not soon through the downtown area and heading out on the other side, wondering where to find the unnumbered Interstate I need, referred to on my map as the BlueGrass Parkway. My road seems to be the 68 West. Well, West is a good direction, but will the 68 hit my road? The answer soon becomes only too obvious as I head further and further away from Lexington and the only junctions I'm crossing are for roads with absurdly long numbers like 1357. However, a quick consultation with my map reassures me that all is well. Just keep on the road till you hit the 127, it tells me, then head back North. See, when you travel by yourself long enough, not only do you speak to the car and the map, but they start to speak back. Actually, for an unscheduled detour, the 68 West turns out to be pretty good. It takes me along by mowed horse paddocks with white picket fences, a rocky river canyon, a Shaker village (a surprisingly durable sect considering the celibacy requirements) and a replica fort with old grave stones next to it, telling the lives of people who left Europe in the 1750s. By the time I rediscover my road, I feel I've had a good taste of Kentucky, though I still don't know what bluegrass is. Back on my road (signed as IBG), I make rapid progress to Mammoth Cave National Park, where I discover that despite assertions to the contrary in my guide book, I've hit Central Time. Good, one hour ahead of schedule. Time enough to go feel the cold air wafting out from the historic cave entrance and take a trail down to the Green River (which really is very green.) It feels good to be out in the open air again, away from my car and moving my whole body instead of just my driving knee.

17th October

On the road from Nashville to Memphis (after a night in Lucy Huntzinger's tartan decorated annex, one of the follies of the previous residents), I end up flipping through the radio stations. At first I get plenty of commentary on the Clinton/ Dole presidential debate, televised last night. "People are saying Dole went for the knock-out blow [by questioning Clinton's trustworthiness], but never has so little been done with so much material," suggests one commentator. "Clinton's campaign team are saying he doesn't have to reply as 'the People' didn't ask the question," sneers another. "The verdict won't be known till voting day," says a third, hedging his bets. Meanwhile on the bible station, they've just played 'God Save America'. "We'll be playing that a lot more in the next 3 weeks," adds the announcer. "We hope people will come to their senses." On another station they're suggesting we march on Washington to abolish government altogether. "Both parties are full of lawyers. They don't know what the real people want." "We knew democracy was a big mistake back in the 1850s," says a caller, phoning in to Republican Rush Limbaugh's show. "And by the way, I feel honored to talk to

you on your mother's birthday," he adds in best Republican family values mode. Finally I reach a limboland where there are no more chat shows, no more bible evangelists, just country music stations singing about love and rodeo hands. I switch off the radio and put on my Fugees tape and let the rap fill in the colour to the road.

There isn't really time to take on Memphis, but I make a quick detour to Elvis Presley Boulevard to see Graceland. My friends at school all used to be Elvis mad, so some curiosity has rubbed off on me. Besides, I need a break from driving. The first sight that greets me as I limp out of the car park is a sign to what I take to be Lisa Marie's private plane. Of course, I think, the second generation of Presleys are getting in on the act. It's only later that I realise that this is one of Elvis's old planes, named Lisa Marie for his daughter. Ignoring such doubtless fascinating side trips as the Elvis automobile collection and the Elvis memorabilia museum, I sign up for the audio tour of Graceland. I know audio tours are pretty common these days, but this was the first I've been on. It has to be said, I found a certain amusement value to watching middle aged Americans struggling with the technology. "Mine doesn't work." "Should we turn it on yet?" "I can't hear anything." Then there's the sense of disconnection in wandering around to your own private soundtrack. I like it because I'm on my own, but I can't imagine it's such a great way to share the tour if you're with your spouse as everyone else seems to be (so much so that the coach driver makes jokes about remembering to take home the right wife). I also like the way they keep reminding us that we can switch off the tape if we need more time. Do people really need permission?

I'd come to Graceland expecting to be grossed out by evidence of Elvis's excessive lifestyle. But, instead, feel something like envy. The house is set up so all his friends can come and stay. They have a games rooms, a swimming pool, kitchen staff to feed them (even if there was meatloaf on the menu every night one month), riding stables and my favourite room of all, the electric yellow basement with jukebox and bank of six TV screens (ultimate in high tech visuals at the time, I'm sure). Yeah, I've always wanted my own den with jukebox! The whole set-up comes very close to my schoolday fantasies of living in a huge mansion with all my friends. And maybe that's the problem, it's an adolescent fantasy. Elvis and all his buddies hanging out together just like when they were all kids or in the army. After twenty years maybe you need a different kind of lifestyle. Maybe you need to move on. Well, I guess Elvis did.

After the house comes the trophy room where the true tack begins. The audio took this chance to reprise Elvis's career, with lots of soundbites from his music - a justification after all for the audio tour. We go down halls lined with gold and platinum discs, pause for a brief excursion into Elvis's army career, down past the movie posters and on to the excessive sequined and lamed costumes of his latter days. Though considering what some people wore in the seventies, I guess they aren't that extreme. The final phase is the racket ball court where Elvis died and the memorial garden where he is buried with his family, next to a plaque commemorating his dead twin (Elvis, like P.K. Dick, had a dead twin). One last heart-stirring song and we're done.

I leave with a vague desire to find an Elvis tape to play in the car; but I have to search long and hard to find any of Elvis's music at all in the souvenir shop. And then there are only two collections, neither of which appeal enough for me to purchase. Clearly Elvis's music is not what the Graceland experience is all about.

18th October

Arkansas is doing its best to cash in on Bill Clinton despite the quantities of invective coming out about him on the radio. "Would you trust this man to tell the truth about his golfing score?" suggests Bob Dole in an informed contribution to the political debate. Attacks on Bill are exceeded only by advertisements for books claiming to reveal the true hidden agenda of Hillary Rodham Clinton. Power hungry opportunist, says one. Radical socialist, says another. Which is the worse slur in America, I wonder? Arkansas, first home of Bill Clinton, say the signs as I enter the state. Little Rock, Bill Clinton's first state capital, say the signs at Little Rock. Hope, birthplace of Bill Clinton, say the signs at Hope. I detour into Hope as I want something sweet for breakfast to keep my blood sugar concentration up. I'd just heard on the TV that kids who have sugar for breakfast perform better than those who don't. What a great excuse! Hope looks like one of those one horse towns that straggles along the roadside till it peters out again. I pass an abandoned gas station and cross to what may or may not be the wrong side of the railroad tracks. Suddenly the town opens up into a street of shops, banks and the mandatory car park. So I stop for a walk round the centre and discover what Hope is really famous for. Water melons. A sign on the wall says "The biggest water melons in the

USA." There's also a water melon souvenir shop (though no actual melons) and postcards of a girl in a bikini sitting in a field of water melons, looking like it was taken in the '50s. There's various postcards of Clinton too, but only one that shows Hope - a montage of the four houses where Clinton has lived, including the White House and the one in Hope where he was born. It looks better than any of the rather run down houses I passed earlier. I go on to the bakery and buy a banana muffin, very conscious of my accent in contrast to their Southern brightness. It turns out to be one of the best muffins I've had in ages, so there's something else Hope's good for.

After a relaxed few days at Mike and Sherry's exchanging several years worth of gossip, it was back on the road again.

22nd October

Downtown San Antonio seems more yuppie than Spanish. The Alamo and its history reduced to the status of photo opportunity to draw in the crowds to Wendys and Woolworths. The Alamo museum is very wordy, lots to read, but rather less to see. Should be ideal for the average SF fan. Despite some chronological haphazardness, it gives a pretty good idea of the history of Texas, provided one doesn't get too bogged down in all the battles. And it finally clarifies for me why Texas isn't like Mexico. The Spanish didn't have the manpower to develop it. A few scattered missions, that's all, then an appeal to the land hungry masses of the emergent USA to come in and stake the territory against Indian raiders. Which they did. It's interesting to look at the Alamo roll of honour. It was defended by very few native born Texans (all of them with Spanish names) and huge numbers of people from Tennessee, Kentucky, Pennsylvania and other points East.

Back in the yuppie zone, all the riverside area has been developed into little bars, restaurants and walks. No shortage of eating opportunities for the hungry fans of Lone Star con, I reckon. I walk past the convention centre and the Hilton, and have a flash of how it will be next Labor Day, with the whole area swarming with people in badges. I can't quite take it, and head back to my car to go see some more missions instead.

23rd October

By now I've developed a routine for finding accomodation. Each time you enter a state, there's usually a rest area with tourist information. For some reason I always seem to be crossing state boundaries around five in the afternoon, which is also the time at which such tourist offices close. In Arkansas I was two minutes too late. Today, in Louisiana, I make it with five minutes to spare. The importance of these visitors' centres is that they contain the motel coupon books. The reductions you get from the coupons aren't that significant, but the books do give a good overview of what accomodation is available, where to find it, and which motel is most likely to be the cheapest. The lack of such information on Arkansas left me skirting Little Rock in a thunderstorm, wondering where they had hidden all the motels, while coming in to Lafayette I can pace myself, knowing which exit I want. Back when I set out, I naively imagined I would be searching out the cheap accomodation recommended in my (sorry, Belmont library's) copy of Let's Go USA 1996. Frank thought I was crazy. Why use a guide book when you can just come off the Interstate at the nearest strip and book in to somewhere more or less identical? And that's how it works, give or take the tendency for there to be no strip just when you want to stop. The drawback is that wherever you stop, you're not in the place lovingly described by the guidebook, but in an identikit complex of Days Inn, Motel 6, Super8, MacDonalds, Waffle House, Wal Mart, Exxon etc. Unless you can find a budget downtown motel, you're not going to be able to wander round a city centre, or admire a view or whatever. You're just going to have a choice of watching the traffic come off the Interstate or retire to your room to check whether your HBO entertainment channel is working.

24th October

The Acadian village at Lafayette is very odd. It's not a real village at all, but a collection of old houses transplanted to a bit of spare land to act like a late 18th century village. As such, it doesn't quite gel. There's no feel of village community, just a kind of tokenism from the artificial representation of every facet of village life - church, school house, blacksmith, doctor. But in spite of this, it's fascinating. For one things, all the houses are real. They smell old. The wood's old. You can walk round them and imagine what it might have been like to be a French Canadian setting up house in the dank, mosquito ridden atmosphere of Louisiana. Also, all the houses are stuffed full of period

artefacts. Singer sewing machines, flat irons, medicine bottles, fly whisks, old cajun records, violins, books, newspapers, medical certificates, wheelchairs, photographs, even hot sauce bottles. Not at all the usual American approach which is a small amount of history presented immaculately. Instead, there's loads of stuff, just left lying around in the houses where you can pick it up and touch it. All the commentary and labelling was obviously done some time ago. Most of it is visibly fading. Some typed on manual typewriters. Some, judging by the phraseology, written by French native speakers. But it all tends to be interesting. As are the press clippings and odd pages from books picked out to accompany the material. It smacks more of individual enthusiasm than professionalism, which in the context of modern tourism is rather refreshing. At the end of the tour you arrive at the museum where the curator sits eagerly by the door, urging you to come in. If you do so, he immediately shows you the prehistoric Indian arrowheads and asks you if you have any questions. Here is a man who badly wants to share his expertise, and all the tourists do is mutter excuses about needing a coke, or the restroom and sidle away quickly, even though the man has two genuine Indian canoes, a 2,500 year old Tchefonete Culture vase and pictures of French missionaries being burned in Louisiana. I feel sorry for him, but don't have any particular questions, even though I'm fascinated by the old maps of Louisiana. It's always very amusing to be reminded that the French sold Louisiana to the Americans for some paltry sum (though I guess this was all profit compared to what it cost Britain to fail to keep its colonies). Thank goodness, a party of Germans come in and I'm let off the hook.

All the same, I make it to the Cajun restaurant just too late for the Cajun lunch buffet. I have to make do with Crawfish Po' Boy and amuse myself by watching a party of French encounter American French dressing for the first time. "Is there anything wrong?" asks the waitress. "No." The guy gives a gallic shrug. "But, it's not normally red." Indeed.

25th October

Totalling a motel in Mobile. Or this puts a new meaning on the phrase wrecking your motel room. I finally think I have things sussed. I decide to do a low driving day and stop in Mobile at lunch time and get a motel room right away to save all that frantic driving around in the dark that's stressing me out so much. I drive down Mobile's main street, Governor Road, with all the beautiful houses and trees and see a motel advertising rooms from \$28.00. I don't react quickly enough to pull in, but figure I can always go back for it. I visit the museum, and from there get directions to the Welcome Centre. At the Welcome Centre I ask about motels and they find me one on Governor Road for \$28.00. Sounds just like what I wanted. It's only when they show me the location, way out of historic downtown, that I realise I've blown it again. Yet another piece of striptown America. I ask about the other hotel I saw. At first they deny all knowledge; then they say, don't go there, it's nasty. "In what way, nasty?" I ask. "Dirty," they say. "They don't clean the rooms properly." Well, who cares for one night I think. I don't always clean my room properly either. And what about those rooms in Mexico where we found other people's toe clippings, and all kinds of insects? Travel must be so traumatic if you keep inspecting your room for dirt. I've noticed that each time someone tries to put me off a cheap motel it's with this "It isn't very nice" prissiness. Maybe they're just trying to protect prices. In the end they're all just boxes with a bed in them and the only difference in my experience, once you've locked the door, is whether the TV works or not.

Well, since they've already booked me my room, I decide to stick with it. I go all the way back past the pretty houses, till I'm out on a strip of standard Americana again. I could have wept. Still, the motel turns out to be less identikit than I'd imagined. It's just beyond the strip, set back from the road, with a friendly owner, a refreshment room with ice, coffee and a microwave, and homely old furniture in the rooms. Character, I think, trying to make myself appreciate it. I unload my luggage, recheck the map of downtown and start the car, ready to head back to the beautiful mansions of Mobile. Crash! Instead of going backwards, I jolt forwards into the edge of my motel room. I survey the damage. Several bricks at the bottom of the wall have been dislodged, and the left side of the doorpost is slightly buckled. I can't believe I've just done that! It all happened so quickly. The car is fine - it's taken the impact on the bumpers; I'm fine; but the motel looks distinctly damaged. I feel terrible. Embarrassed. The friendly motel manager isn't going to be friendly much longer.

In fact, he's very business-like about it all. He doesn't waste time on recriminations. First of all he gets his mate to help straighten the door post so they can get the room unlocked, then he takes all my details, rings my insurance company and calls in the police to report the accident. I begin to feel worse and worse. Frustrated because now there won't be time to see Mobile. Ashamed because I've

done something so stupid. Embarrassed at the thought of what everyone will say when they find out. Sitting in a room with the motel manager's wife, who, for christ's sake, has to have little tubes up her nose to breathe, I try to put this all into perspective. No-one is hurt. The car's okay. The motel manager should get his money for the repairs. It won't hurt the insurance company to pay out; that's what they're there for. Their statistics take into account people like me. And it probably won't even affect my insurance record in the UK. Somehow none of this logic really helps. I'd been feeling a bit down about my road trip anyway the last couple of days. Too much driving, too much stress finding the right roads and right motels. To begin with it was fun, a challenge to prove I could do it and a pleasant change to have control over my life again; eat what I wanted when I wanted, watch what I liked on TV. Then after I made it to Texas successfully, it began to pall. And now, with this accident, I can't even say I can do it, really. My rest day was turning out more stressful than any other.

After the police have been, I do manage to get back to Mobile and walk round past those beautiful houses. But the magic has gone. It's getting late, I'm the only tourist around and get one or two comments from men passing on the street or in their cars. I don't stop. Go on, beat me up, I think. I don't care, it's that kind of day. I pass the motel I saw earlier in the day. It looks perfectly safe and no more nasty than anywhere else. I wish I'd gone there. I bet they don't have walls that crumble at the slightest impact. I start thinking about that crash again. What did happen? I know why I went forward rather than back. I habitually go into drive before reverse on my car, because drive takes off the parking brake and also it's easier to get into reverse from there. But presumably my foot wasn't on the brake when I did it. Or not on hard enough, so I'd gone forward. I couldn't even remember having to brake. As I said before, it all happened in an instant. But it seems to me, thinking about it, that the car hardly hit with any force. It didn't shake me up or damage the car. Maybe the motel walls were so fragile that you could just kick them and they'd fall in. It makes me feel a bit better to believe this. But, I think after a while, I'm rewriting history to make it the way I want. People often do that. I must have had to hit the brake really, I decide later, because my guide book is on the floor and the shade flap out of place. I simply wasn't paying enough attention and screwed up.

Back at the motel I start to feel bad again. I can hear people talking outside. I imagine they're all telling each other about what I did. I switch on the TV to cover up the voices, and watch cockroaches boring under people's skins in motel rooms on the X-Files ("I don't need this!") and the series premier of Millenium, which in my misanthropic mood seems exploitative and annoying. The only women in it are victims. The sex and violence are being used to titillate. The millennialists prophecies are just tapping into New Age woolly-mindedness. And worst of all, the hero is called Frank Black. The producers seem to be trying for a hip Seattle music feel, so surely they must know there is already a musician called Frank Black? I wonder if the only justification for the series is to give the announcer the change to say: "Stay tuned for scenes from the next Millenium!"

26th October

I decide to get out of Mobile as quickly as possible before I commit any more misdemeanours. I head on down the Interstate to Montgomery, the state capital of Alabama. Downtown Montgomery is deserted. I stand on the steps of the Capitol building and look down the main street, past all the big white government buildings, and there is barely a car in sight. Where is everyone? Have all the civil servants been called out for an emergency pre-election briefing? Then I remember. It's Saturday. No wonder there's no-one there but me, a few other tourists and the security guards.

Montgomery's only claim to fame seems to be that it was the first capital of the Confederate for a few months before they moved it on to Richmond, Virginia. The Capitol building is full of rooms arranged just how they might have been when the Confederacy was declared. Opposite the Capitol is a scaffold-covered building billed as the first White House where Jefferson Davies lived for a few months before he too went off to Virginia. Naturally, none of the notices or displays attempt to give any account of the issues involved in the Civil War. It's just treated as a romantic adventure, a chance to praise the bravery and heroism of those who fought and died for the South. Yet Montgomery was also a centre for the Civil Rights movement. Martin Luther King worked in a Baptist church just down the streets from the Capitol. Rosa Parks sparked off the bus boycott in Montgomery by refusing to give up her seat for a white. At least there's a monument to the Civil Rights movement a couple of blocks away. A moving record of the struggle against black inequality in the form of names of those who died and dates of key events engraved round a flat black stone with water running across it..

After Montgomery I cross into Georgia and also back into Eastern time. It doesn't seem worth adjusting my watch. The clocks will be changing to daylight saving time in a few hours and I'll be back on the same time again.

27th October

The biggest excitement about Macon, Georgia's so-called dream city, is discovering that its name rhymes with bacon. The streets are deserted apart from churchgoers and sleazy truck drivers who hang around the car parks trying to have 'fun' with passing women. Nothing opens till one on a Sunday. The best sight is a dilapidated historic house kitted out for Halloween with cobwebs, hanging mannequin and gravestones. Verdict on the Macon experience : Metter is better than Macon, Unless you want buffet with bacon. (Metter being a place along the Interstate where I stopped for lunch buffet.)

The day brightens up as I head East towards Savannah. In the sunshine, Savannah is everything I hoped it would be - little squares, live oaks hung with moss, palm trees, serene Georgian mansions, outdoor cafes and a cobbled riverfront area. And it is actually a relief to see fellow tourists again, and not be the only person with a camera.

I book into the Budget Inn and discover the truth about these cheap and nasty motels - ALL the TVs don't work (honest, I tried them.) This is also the day when I turned into a true American - I take the car just to go a few yards across the road to get something to eat.

28th October

I go back to finish looking round Savannah. I can't get over how many of those little squares there are, inspired by the town planning concepts of the first settlers, a load of religious idealists from Gravesend in Essex. The founder of the city was anti-slavery, not on human rights principles, but because he thought owning slaves made people lazy. Needless to say his influence didn't last long, particularly once the settlers found they could "borrow" slaves from neighbouring Charleston. But the freedom concept seems to have gained ground since then. Down on the quay they are setting up for a free concert, the taffy shop is giving out free taffy, and all the restaurants are offering free samples of their food. Accepting these in the spirit of hors d'oeuvres, I choose a pub with a sunny balcony overlooking the quays and river, and have blackened cajun gripper. After lunch I head East for the beaches and go for a swim - the latest in the season I've ever been sea-bathing before. The water's still pretty warm. On the way back I swing past the Civil War fort and walk round the walls, imagining myself watching for enemy ships. Eventually one arrives and I see it pass by in a channel so close to the fort that it looks like it's sailing through the trees.

29th October

Charleston seems larger and hotter than Savannah. But the waterfront area is impressive. Basically it's on a peninsula, so you can walk round three sides of a bay. Cheap thrill for the budget tourist has to be the pier in Waterfront Park with benches that swing and telescopic views round the bay, all for free. Back in the heat of the town, historic Queen Street shopping area looks for all the world like an English High Street. Or maybe this is just the effect of seeing a branch of Laura Ashley there.

I stop for the night at another budget motel, run by Asians and frequented by truckers, but at least the TV works. This one you really could knock down without the aid of a car. Quite a few of the cheaper motels I've stayed in have been run by Asians, I realise, so maybe prejudice is another factor at work when people start telling me places are 'nasty'.

I drive out for food once more, heading for the big illuminated sombrero I noticed when I pulled in at the motel. I assume it's going to be a Mexican restaurant, but as I get nearer, I realise it's a whole Mexican theme park, complete with shops, cantinas, fairground rides, 'golf of Mexico', hotels, restaurants and overpriced petrol. Here is the Mexican schtick taken to extremes. Someone should restart Mexicon just to hold one there. I eat indifferent Mexican food at South of the Border then go round the gift shop to verify that the souvenirs are as ersatz as the rest of the place. Still, it provides a bit of amusement for the evening; a stopgap before going back to my motel room to flick through the channels and listen to the truckers.

30th October

Back when I was at the 2nd Friday party at Ted White's, there was a plan afloat to go to Baltimore for Halloween and read poetry at the grave of Edgar Allan Poe. By the time I check back with Lynn

she's decided it would be too far to go on a weekday night, particularly with Dan working. Meanwhile, I still have the thought of Poe in my head, so when I spot that there's a Poe museum in Richmond, I decide to stop off en route to Washington. With a bit of adventurous driving, I make it into the museum car park by ten past three. The man at the cash desk offers me a place on the three o'clock tour, which I soon discover was not so much running late as lacking in demand till I arrived. He beckons in an elderly lady with a walking stick. "Anyone else for the tour?" he asks. She shakes her streaked white head. Looking at her features and the tight curls round the edge of her face, I decide she must be part negro. Slightly apprehensive that she will expect me to be knowledgeable about Poe (she does have something of a school mistress air about her), but not wishing to pass up my chance for a private tour, I sign on.

We begin with the story of the house. The place is called the Poe House, even though Poe never lived there. Well, he *might* have visited there once, my guide assures me, as part of the honour guard for Lafayette, and if he didn't actually go in, well, he definitely would have stood outside. And besides, they *did* have some furniture from the newspaper office where Poe worked that *might* have been there in his day. But the piece de resistance of the Poe House is soon to be revealed - a big plasticine model of Richmond in Poe's day, lovingly crafted by one of the previous curators who spent several years making sure all the historical details on the houses were correct. The old lady takes me round to the back of the room-sized glass case that houses the model and begins on the story, as spooky a Halloween tale as I could have hoped for. Everyone, it seems, died of TB at the fateful age of 24 - Poe's mother, his brother, his wife. There were fires, feuds, broken romances, poverty. In fact, all it lacks are little plasticine models to reenact the scenes for us. Instead the old lady coughs a lot to give the appropriate sound effects for TB. And then comes the ultimate tragedy, just on the verge of marrying his childhood sweetheart Elmira, Poe dies mysteriously in Baltimore. My guide favours diabetes as the cause of death as this would also exonerate Poe from the charge of being an alcoholic. Apparently just drinking a glass of wine made him drunk and ill, which is, she tells me, consistent with the symptoms of diabetes. I can see she also has a lingering fondness for some tubercular related pathology, just to complete the tragic picture of a genetically stricken family, but isn't so keen on the recent theory that he died of rabies. "People are always coming up with new theories," she says, dismissively. After taking the opportunity to ask about the fate of all the other characters in the story, we finally depart with reluctance from our plasticine world of Richmond and go on to another room full of memorabilia. At the end of the tour my guide thanks me profusely. I can see that something along the lines of "The three o'clock tour wouldn't have been the same without you," would be accurate, but not really called for, so I do my best to thank her too. It really has been a fascinating experience. I leave pondering on the lives of artists. Do they really need so much tragedy to produce great art? Could Poe have written such dark macabre stories without the spur of frequent deaths? Maybe it was a pity I wasn't going to commune at his grave after all.

31st October

Back in Washington DC, and I finally get my chance to go round the museums. It's such a perfect day though, crisp and sunny, that I spend too much time wandering between the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, then realise I'm not going to be able to do justice to the art museum (let alone history, natural history and the rest of the Smithsonian).

At the end of the day I meet up with Lynn Steffan in a bar so we can avoid Halloween trick or treaters. This we do quite successfully, only to be subjected instead to a dramatic rendering of C S Lewis's Screwtape Letters. We listen for a bit, but the philosophical interludes are hard to follow in the pub environment. Also the cowed performer, once in his stride, is milking the occasion for all it's worth and begins to shout when he thinks we're not paying attention. Several drinkers leave, including the one described by my neighbour as the worst beer bore he's ever known. "Obviously can't take the strain of not being able to talk about his beer," he comments, We agree that his departure could be some slight compensation for being harangued by our preacher manque. At last the letters end, and we all applaud politely. Unfortunately, the performer mistakes this for encouragement and makes a ten minute thank you speech. This time I don't applaud.

Luckily, that night Dan doesn't ask me again what I dislike about America. Otherwise he might have got a long answer full of rants about Interstates, road signs, speed limits, the car culture, malls, motel chains, Subways, fried food and my sheer incredulity that such a huge country has dedicated its ingenuity to building not the better world of the early settlers but a neon-lit standardised amenity park for each of its roadsides. Is this the American dream?

NEVER AGAIN

describes my feelings about most of the events mentioned in the last issue of Never Quite Arriving and by some strange coincidence is also the name of the letter column. What more serendipity could you want? The American COA seems to have discouraged most of the my British readers from responding. Presumably, in common with most of my friends and family they don't believe in the existence of an nternational postal service (thank goodness for e-mail is all I can say). Well, if scanning my mail box for signs of a British stamp was a lost cause, the American mail still seemed to be working, bringing with it, notably, this thoughtful response from :

Vicky Rosenzweig, 33 Indian Road, 6-R, New York, NY 10034, USA

I occasionally wish I had the budget to travel around the world; the truth is, I might manage to make such a trip (probably by injudicious use of credit cards), but it would mean throwing away most of the security I've constructed here. Giving up my job might be reasonable; doing so, spending all my savings and collecting a large credit card debt in the process seems like a bad idea.

Financially speaking, I have to agree with you. But, providing I can get more work when I get home, I shouldn't be in too bad a position. Maybe I had less securitry to throw away in the first place.

It was disconcerting to realize that while I might have daydreamed about traveling with nothing but a couple of changes of clothing and a notebook, in reality I like large parts of my daily routine, and the fact that it is a routine, knowing where the tea is, walking through the park every morning on the way to the train, and so on. Even at 20, I knew I'd miss people if I ever took off like that; I didn't quite realize, then, that I'd miss certain habits. A week in Seattle, or three in Britain, sure, but even that I try to schedule so as not to miss Spring here at home, where even a weekend away can mean things happening without me. Maybe I've been reading too much May Sarton and not enough Bruce Chatwin.

I've managed to schedule my travels so that I get two Autumns and no Spring, which is a pity as I like Spring. On the other hand, I have no regrets at all over missing Winter. As to favourite routines - I don't think I had many. That was why I had to leave, because my life was set up in such a way that I hated all my daily routines, which contained far too much stress, commuting and city traffic. I've been to so many beautiful places on my travels that I now think I want something more from my surroundings than convenient access to the shops and buses. (Though after my road trip I do recognise the advantage of being in familiar surroundings. Forever being the newcomer in a place is quite a stressful position.)

Your Amsterdam trip sounds like a lot of fun. If you don't habitually visit museums when you're home, you probably don't need to when you're on vacation either. I went to the V&A and the London Transport Museum the last time I was in London, and the British Museum and Tate on my first trip, but I am a member of the American Museum of Natural History, and go to the Met, the New York City Transit Museum and the Brooklyn Museum when there's an exhibit I'm interested in, or if I want to renew my acquaintance with Rodin's sculpture or Tiffany's glass. Besides, walking around a city and eating the local food is probably as good a way as any to get a feeling for a place. The trick is not to come home with a craving for things that can't be found or easily made where you live.

In Mexico I visited the local museums and ended up with a craving for the local foods. There are plenty of Mexican restaurants in Bristol, but most of them don't serve quite what I ate in Mexico. I don't go to museums much in Bristol, though I have been the Exploratory (the local hands-on science museum) a couple of times, and the historical museum too. But when you're visiting a city stashed with the treasures of the world in some major form, it's hard not to feel you should be checking them out, whatever your normal museum visiting patterns are. On the other hand, I take your point about doing the things you ordinarily like when visiting a place - this could account for why I've spent a great deal of time so far on the beach and swimming!

“Broken” is indeed a sad tale. Why shouldn’t you be able to be friends with your ex-husband? The assumption that it’s impossible strikes me as sad and a bit odd: if you had enough in common to be married to a person, you ought to have enough in common to have dinner together now and again, if you managed to end the marriage without hating each other. Besides, would either you or Peter-Fred really be better off if you hadn’t seen each other at all since the day you broke up? “I can’t see you ever again” would have hurt no matter when he said it. And it’s probably easier not to have to adjust to practicalities like the loss of the toolbox and car at the same time as dealing with the emotional difficulties of a break-up. In an odd way, though, I’m feeling sorry for Peter-Fred as well. It sounds as though Nicky wants to remodel his life as well as his wardrobe. Maybe he wants a new life, but does he want hers? I may be over-analogizing: a friend of mine, some years ago, dropped not only his ex but most of their mutual friends when he got involved with someone else. It was largely his new girlfriend’s idea: she didn’t think it was good for a couple if either of them saw their ex-lovers (or ex-spouses), and it would have been more trouble than he wanted to take to see us and not her. Since then, my friend and this woman have been married and divorced; she doesn’t want to see him anymore, since she’s now married to someone else, and a lot of his erstwhile friends have decided that they don’t want to bother making room in their lives for someone who had dropped them for no good reason.

Yes, I’ve heard people predict that this is what will happen with Peter-Fred. Do I want it all to end in tears? Yes - part of me says. He shouldn’t be able to cut us all out of his life without any consequences. Why, that might mean we really are just a sad bunch of fans with nothing going for us. But mostly I just feel he’s missing out on all sorts of things he used to enjoy, and that to me seems a pity.

Not surprisingly, most readers preferred to duck out of discussing other people’s personal life, and focus instead on the pros and cons of laundromats.

George Flynn, PO Box 1069, Kendall Square Station, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA
I never owned a washing machine, so I’m thoroughly used to going to the laundromat [American for ‘laundrette’]. Never had much trouble, except during the period when this (singularly unattractive) woman somehow decided that I was a rich professor (wrong on both counts, and pretty much of an oxymoron anyway) and therefore a Good Catch, so she kept coming on to me whenever I showed up. I finally had to change my schedule to avoid her.

This would seem to be something of an occupational hazard of laundrettes...

Darroll Pardoe, 36 Hamilton Street, Hoole, Chester, CH2 3JQ, UK

I remember that once when we were living in Tottenham, I was in the laundrette and a couple of girls about twelve years old dressed in an extraordinary manner came in and offered me the use of their bodies (for a price). I politely declined and they went away, but I did think it was rather a risky thing for twelve year olds to be doing. Nothing quite like that has happened to me in a laundrette since!

I have always thought that, as with so many things, the Americans organise laundrettes a lot better than we do. Here I have the use of a poky little place with nine washers and six tumble-driers: American cities seem to always have these enormous establishments with dozens of machines in serried ranks, and armies of customers milling around, or maybe enjoying the bar or the coffee shop next door while their clothes are in the wash

Luckily I haven’t been forced to discover the reality of the laundromat here as I have all the laundry facilities that I need within a few feet of my bed. Yes, it’s true, I’m sleeping in the laundry room! A fitting punishment for complaining about not having a washing machine if ever I heard one.

Harry Warner, Jr, 423 Summit Avenue, Hagerstown, Maryland, 21740, USA

Laundromats, laundrettes, and others of the same species although differing in names are the one money-saving expedient I haven’t turned to in recent years when I’ve been plagued by increased cost of living expenses and retirement income that is stable except when low interest rates causes it to shrink. I just don’t like the thought of washing my dirty linen in public. So I spend several dollars

more each week to have the purification done by one of the very few establishments in Hagerstown that still do all sorts of laundry. This is rather hectic at times because the laundry is all the time losing this or that and sometimes startles me by including in my wash a garment which I not only didn't send but can't imagine how and why it is worn by men or women or others. To make things worse, this laundry is about a mile from my house and I've grown old enough that I can no longer walk to it with the dirty laundry and back with the package of clean laundry in winter when it's extremely cold or in summer when it's terribly hot and for one reason or another, I can't use the car. The bus would take me no closer than two and one-half blocks to the laundry and would require a wait of nearly an hour after I got there to return home. During the long series of heavy snowfalls this past winter, I ran so low on clean laundry that I almost imitated Scarlett O'Hara and Maria Von Trapp by cutting up living room drapes and fashioning them into emergency garments.

Well, let's hope it's a mild winter this year! Harry goes on to discuss my account of an interview to do voluntary work overseas.

I'm sure I wouldn't have enough public spirit and courage to take a job in Africa without some support from others who speak my language and have a common heritage close to my working place. I don't understand why Skillshare Africa requires its employees to go it alone. I would think that such a situation would impair a person's competency, because that very aloneness would prey on the mind and create time-consuming uncertainties. It isn't a question of color; I would have the same hesitancy about becoming a newspaper reporter in Tasmania or a professional musician in Wales without another American or two to provide company, advice and assistance in special problems.

I think the idea is that the volunteer worker shouldn't try to impose outside solutions on other people's problems. Which ironically creates a situation where the worker is practically been asked to forget the competencies that they were brought to the country to supply. I suspect 'time consuming uncertainties' come with the territory.

Janet Stevenson, Roan, Roweltown, Carlisle CA6 6LX, UK

Interviews are awful, aren't they? I had the impression that you would have turned the job in Lesotho down even if you had been offered it. At least from this one you learned something about yourself that led to something better. I share your preference for not going into bars alone. Though I once had a meal alone in one in Amsterdam. I remained unsexed and undoped, as well. That was just before I launched myself on a train en route to the GDR. (Did you know that the GDR is now a nostalgia item? They have "GDR camps" and postcard books of GDR items.)

Changing your environment is one thing : changing yourself is another. I had great problems explaining to Gordon's Gran that I could be happy (or not) in both the South and North, happiness was not totally dependent on external factors.

True, though when it comes to continents and cultural differences more extreme than those between the north and south of England, it can have a large bearing on your life.

Colin Greenland, 98 Sturton Street, Cambridge CB1 2QA, UK

Falling out with Peter-Fred and Barb, whoever she is, must have been hard, but I must say fleeing the country does seem a bit drastic. Hope it's a splendid trip and we get to read all about it one day. Also that the new Christina Lake is not *too* different from the original.

'Fraid she's been murdered in a dark alley somewhere behind MIT and stuffed down the back of a computer. The new Christina is, unfortunately, even more irritating than the old.

I sympathized with William Bains, wondering what to do with several copies of his book in Hungarian. I had the same problem confronted with *Take Back Plenty* in Spanish, Italian, Dutch &c. They were large, and there were several of each of them. It didn't seem fair, somehow, to bestow them upon the local Help the Aged shop... In the end, I asked my agent what she thought I should do with a copy of *Take Back Plenty* in Spanish. Her reply was no less baffling than the original dilemma. 'Give it to your bank manager, darling,' she advised. Evidently she thought he (it is a he, I

suppose) would be well impressed. No doubt he would take it home and show it proudly to his wife. She would dust and polish it, and choose a place of suitable prominence to display it: on top of the piano, perhaps. She would take out a crocheted doiley to stand it on, while her husband assembled the family, children, pets, aged parents, lodger, to admire it. 'Goodness, father,' the youngest would lisp. 'How will you ever show Dr Greenland how grateful we are for this magnificent gift?' The bank manager would smile broadly, and pat the winsome infant on the head. 'I shall take the very first opportunity of extending him a sizeable permanent loan at 0% interest, never fear!'

Brad W. Foster, POB 165246, Irving, TX 75016, USA

I liked the cover to this fourth issue. Took me a second to "get it", then noticed the zine floating in from above, and figured it meant you'll never arrive at the top of the stack of zines, as there are always more to come. Or is it just me because I seem to always have a small stack of zines and stuff that I still need to reply to, and no matter how hard I try to read and loc them, more will arrive so the stack never actually disappears?

I'm not sure that's exactly what Sue Mason had in mind.

Glad you were able to use the two fillos I sent last time. Enclosed are two more that I hope you'll be able to make a home for as well. Remember, there are many fillos that go to bed each night alone and unloved - please, please open your heart and zine to these little orphans.

I'll see what I can do. I'd have thought there'd be no shortage of good homes for these little fellows.

And now for a discussion which I have kidnapped from the pages of Balloons Over Bristol (appearing Real Soon Now from Pete & Sue Binfield in Bristol) since it relates back to an article I wrote on American fanzines .

Ted White, 1014 Tuckahoe St., Falls Church, VA 22046, USA

I was amused by Brian Earl Brown's notion that "Blat!" is large because [it has as its guiding principle] professional magazines like THE NEW YORKER or THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY" I think I can safely say for both Dan and myself that this just isn't true. BLAT! is "large" because it turns out that way. Our guiding idea was this : Our editorials "bookend" the issue (one opens the issue; one closes it). We have two or three regular columnists (Andy Hooper, Barnaby Rapaport and - maybe - Janice Eisen), and one or two other contributors (articles, stories such as Rob's), plus letters. No big deal - a typical fanzine concept. (My model is Gregg Calkins' OOPSLA! - another fanzine title using an exclamation point, you'll note - in which appeared a regular stable of columnists, plus one or two outside contributions. OOPSLA! was one of the best fanzines of the fifties, and one I still remember with pleasure.) Anyway, BLAT! evolved from a "normal" genzine into a much larger one for one reason alone : It's just a fucking fanzine! Why should we limit its size? It's our "hobby" and we can make it as big as we like (and, can afford). Our editorials are the size of personal fanzines in themselves, because that's what we wanted them to be... our personal fanzines, bracketting the genzine. And we'll publish contributions of any length, because we can, and we want pieces to be right, at whatever length they require.

We have only one criterion for BLAT! - we want everything in it to be as good as it can be. (It amazes me that people complain about this.) In the past we (Dan & me) have done "ensmalled" fanzines - like PONG. BLAT! is an "enlarged" fanzine. It is not large in the same way HABBAKUK or MIMOSA are. (HABBAKUK is a modest-sized fanzine with an enormous letter-column... as was STET; MIMOSA publishes lots of separate pieces, of varying quality, among which any one piece can get lost... as happened to mine...)

Jilly Reed's comments strike me as, essentially, ignorant. She admits she's seen few American fanzines, but feels free to comment on their characteristics anyway. And she does so by comparing one over-generalization with another ("it's the same impulse that makes American academics footnote their work to death" - oh, really?) and then deciding that we Americans have "a national appetite for seeing the evidence of hard labour and it ruins appreciation of that which appears light." I don't recognize myself in that description, nor most other American fans. But she goes on: "It's why Gene

Kelly was more popular than Fred Astaire; Astaire made it look effortless but you could see Kelly sweat." But, hey - both Kelly and Astaire were Americans... and it's news to me that Kelly was the more popular of the two. I'd thought Astaire was more popular - or more highly esteemed. "What it boils down to, sadly, is that in America size really does matter." Obviously the opinion of an expert.

Christina states, in reply to Robert Lichtman, "Ted and Dan have written and put together most of the [next BLAT!] but can't put it out because they don't have a printer." This isn't quite true. Dan and I have written most of our editorials, put together the lettercolumn, etc., and the major contributions are "on disk", as we say now... but none of our columnists have turned in their pieces yet. And we await more than just a printer, but that's one item we still need. What we also need is a lot more money, to pay for the actual printing costs - if we use a copy-shop printer. We may not. We may mimeograph BLAT! We have Gestetners and an electro-stenciller. We shall see. What we really need is more time.

Don't we all. Even me. (Really. All this travelling can be quite time consuming, you know. Well, that's my excuse for not making any progress on my novel.) But the good news is that the Steffans now have a printer, so something should be emerging from that corner of Washington DC in the not too distant future, though whether it's Blat! remains to be seen.

I also recieved postcards from Bridget Hardcastle, Teddy Harvia, Jerry Kaufman and Yvonne Rousseau. Thanks too to Dave & Jernny Ragget for putting up with me sitting in their front room typing away at one of their computer for a week. This issue was produced to the sounds of two budgies, one loriqueet, one parakeet, several children, numerous TV programmes and Dave Raggett's computer (which chimes happily when he says nice things to it.)



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