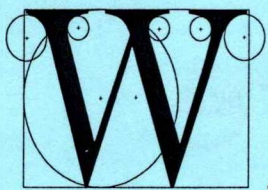


Widening Gyre

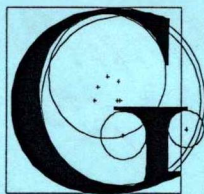


one

Alisa '97



idening



yre

My Zine, and Welcome to It

I never can seem to do things the normal way. It's been almost seventeen years since I got active in fandom, and for most of that time I haven't shown the least inclination to pub my ish (unless you count apazines, which I have been noodling with more or less all along). Like Joel Grey in *Cabaret* I guess I just encountered the wrong three girls fanzines/faneds at first, and decided early on that fanzines weren't really my thing. I'm an instant gratification sort of girl (probably fallout from my first APA having been APA-L, a weekly) and much more fascinated with interaction than generating exposition. (No, it isn't any wonder that my most visible fanac is on Usenet -- the biggest wonder is that it took me as long as it did to get active in it.) Maybe I never quite figured out that you don't necessarily have to publish a *perzine* to put out a zine, or maybe it took me this long to accrue enough writing friends to make keeping my very own self mostly in the background a plausible aspiration. Lately though, the clues and aspirations, ideas and inclinations have been accreting like slow coral until a editing a fanzine seemed like the obvious thing to do. I guess it was time to be a neo all over again, again.

It took a host of gentle friends to get me to this point. I'll credit them with whatever good comes out of this project, and accept the blame for any infelicities, myself. First, I'd like to thank Gary Farber for his persistence in waving fanzines under my nose even after my prolonged show of reluctance. Thanks to his recommendations, I keep getting these spiffy little *Bentos* and things in my mailbox. Thanks to Pam Wells for having the optimism, enthusiasm, or maybe just the big, clanking ones, to send me an issue of *Attitude* even after my public declaration of total ennui with the very concept of fanzines. The scales fell from my eyes, Pam, (which I would have minded less if they hadn't hit my toes on the way down). Thanks to Geri Sullivan for amazing and boundless enthusiasm, for a great fan lounge at LAcon III, and especially for taking me under her wing and offering me help, good advice, access to her mailing list, and even spare fillos from her files. Thanks to all the regulars on rec.arts.sf.fandom for providing me with a new window on larger fandom. Thanks to rich brown for permission to go to Corflu. Thanks to Charles Lee Jackson II, for forcing me to strike out on my own. And thanks very, very much to all of my contributors this issue, for promptness, patience, and generosity of spirit.

Widening Gyre One

June 1997

Widening Gyre is a quarterly fanzine edited by Ulrika O'Brien somewhere in the vicinity of 123 Melody Ln, Apt. C, Costa Mesa, CA 92627, USA. She can also be reached at ulrika@aol.com. Gyre is currently a paper-only zine, though web and electronic versions may follow, and is available for "the usual," where the usual in this case is taken to include zines in trade, letters of comment, art or content contributions, trade beads, and editorial whim. *Widening Gyre 2* is due out in September of 1997.

Editorial essay, in which I fumblingly attempt to explain the choice of my zine title, and my high fallutin' motives for pubbing my ish in the first place, and like that.

Meditations on Genesis by Ulrika O'Brien

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
-- William Butler Yeats
"The Second Coming"*

*"I'm like a clown, I fall for everyone..."
--Joker Berggren
"Never Gonna Say I'm Sorry"*

*"What is life for, if we can't be a joy to each other?"
--Beth, Caltech janitor*

On its own widening gyre, this essay will spiral outward, before striking home. I ask patience; we will get there. But that is not the point. This essay also isn't terribly funny. It probably takes itself a bit too seriously. That's unfortunate, and I apologize, because shared laughter definitely is the point.

I must have been five when my mother and I moved away to Stockholm. Many good things came of that move: we got my Dad, I got another grandmother and, eventually, a brother (okay, maybe not entirely good – sorry, Georg), and Stockholm is a wonderful, green, water girded city that I love to this day, but on the whole, at the time, the move certainly did not seem like A Good Thing. The lode star had gone out of my firmament. "I can't find the road," I sobbed to my Mormor over the phone. "What road?" "The road to *your* house," I said, as if there could be no other. I had gone outside to walk the 200 kilometers back to my grandmother's house, but couldn't find the way. It had never been so impossibly far or difficult to reach before; I couldn't understand it. That was when I first learned that the world was big enough to defeat me. After that the good-byes and the uprootings just sort of pile up (it's one of the bitchiest features of making friends with grad

students and post docs – they pretty much all go scatter to the four corners) but that was the beginning. Lesson: everything you love cannot be kept near at hand, no matter how much you may want it.

I remember walking Old Town Pasadena with Hal, when we were first falling in love. He laughed with bemused delight at the way I walked beside him: seemingly aloof and self-sufficient in one moment, and then welded against him in the crook of his arm the next. The difference was just the smallest gesture. The difference was just which side of the barricade.

I don't know what vanishingly small portion of you are Ace of Base fans, so perhaps I'd never be caught out, but I have to confess that the second quotation above is not right. It's the way I've always heard the song, but it's not how she is writ. I decided to preserve it the way I hear it because, as you see it, it so neatly catches a piece of who I am. I fall in love a lot. Maybe not with everyone, but with a goodly portion of those who are bright and articulate, funny and giving, thoughtful, quirky, and passionate. It's still a lot. I'm basically fascinated with people and boundlessly fond of them. I know that seems a strange confession, coming from someone who's been variously characterized as a hardass and a cynic. In fact, the hardassedness is just the flip side of falling a lot. Not everyone wants to be fallen for. Rejection hurts. So, after a while, you develop defenses: the barricade. If I didn't care, I wouldn't be such a bitch. There's irony for you.

The wonderful and terrifying and powerful thing about writing, to me, is the emotional liberation it gives me. Pieces of me that are hard as hell to *talk* about, or impossible, or embarrassing, run out onto the page with amazing, fluid ease. And writing is durable and reproducible – I sit here in our study and unburden myself at two hundred people. Or unknown thousands. That's the wonder and the power. And, in general, there on the page these things sit, for anyone, just anyone really, to pick up and read about me. There's the terror.

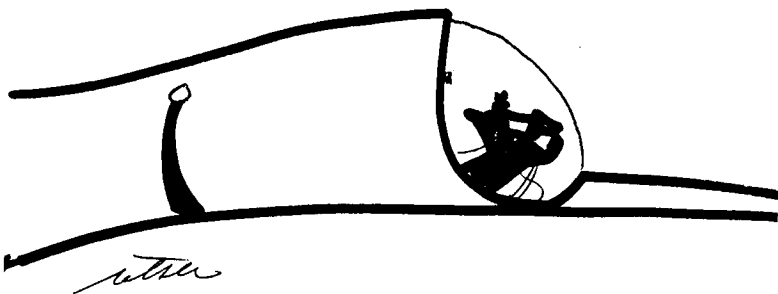
I went through a longish poetical period about ten years back; wrote a surprisingly large bulk of the stuff, most of

which was crap, but, as poetry often is, was also pretty personal. I bound the poems all up in a nifty codex-style spring binder that looks like a book but lets you insert or remove loose pages. I showed the poems to a couple of friends, and, because they asked, made them copies, too. A year or so later, just walking down the hotel hall of some convention, I was blind-sided by this annoying jerk of a local fanboy quoting of my own words back at me, from an ode to a lover of mine. Quoting back at me in a tone of smug, patronizing self-satisfaction that couldn't have been more grating if he'd practiced. I might have done him violence, if my reaction times were better. As it was, I stood startled to the spot while he sailed on, having done his damage. So, obviously, somebody I called a friend had handed these pretty fucking personal (and yes, embarrassingly bad) poems to someone I did not call a friend, without troubling to tell, let alone ask, me. To say I felt raped and spat on would, alas, just be hyperbole, but I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say I felt as if a spotty and unsympathetic stranger had been pawing through my underwear drawer. I'm still angry about that, actually. Lesson: writing is a public act. Brace yourself accordingly.

But, scary as it is, writing is still a basic, if not the basic, tool of fannish friendship. (Though, as I'm sure the Brownings, and if rumor be true, the Gateses, would be happy to point out, others have seen its potential, before and since.) We meet in print. Perhaps because of the seductive freedom I mentioned, we tell each other private things in public, in print, and when we find a sympathetic reader, make the kinds of connections that build friendship, in print. Here I will nod my head in reverence to the Obvious Addendum and Fannish Homile that print is no complete substitute for face-to-face contact, but damn if the writings we make aren't the glue that keeps fandom together. Parts of it, anyway.

And parts is most definitely parts. When I first started posting to rec.arts.sf.fandom I caught a bit of initial flak for posting just under my first name. Karen Cooper in particular felt that using just my first name was dishonest and deceptive, because she'd never heard of me, so I had to use my whole name to prove I was a forthright and upstanding netizen, because just my first name might be mistaken for an anonymous handle. Or something like that. When I first met Andy Hooper online, he sent me private e-mail saying something or other pretty flattering about my writing and allowing as how he'd never heard of me. I asked why he should have. I never got an answer to that one. When Greg Pickersgill gave me what for, for having the temerity to not know who he was, the outstanding reason he gave for discounting my opinions, my words, and my person was that he'd never heard of me, whereas I had merely discounted him for saying something dumb. Now I find Robert Lichtman commenting apologetically in the letter column of Hooper's *Apparatchik* that he's only now added me to the mailing lists for *Trap Door* because up until just before this latest Corflu...say it with me now...he'd never heard of me.

Okay, I'm not the world's quickest, but I begin to see a pattern here. I, apparently, hail from an entirely different fannish planet, because, frankly, I still can't really see why any of them *should* have heard of me. Fandom is a huge place, it contains multitudes, as anyone who's been to a Worldcon lately can attest. And, flattering as it might be to suppose that even some of these folks think that my writing and insights are so compelling as to leave no doubt that word of me should certainly have permeated even the remotest corners of fandom, I don't buy it. So I'm guessing that the underlying assumption uniting these sensitive fannish fen is that anyone established in fandom who might possibly be interested in, or of interest to, fanzine fans, should already be known to them. (Somebody correct me quick if I'm off the mark, but that's how it looks from here.) Okay, I admit it, I don't get that...surely fandom is too big and too varied, with too many only partially overlapping parts, for this to be a plausible theory. I mean, here, let me reel off some names: Rick Albertson, Sivan Dunn-Wall, Thomas Fuller, Elaine Normandy, Vanessa Schnatmeier, Ron Butler...(and on, and on...). Heard of any of them? How about all of them? No? It isn't because they aren't



fannish, or because they can't write the bolts off a rusted bicycle, I promise you. The center cannot hold.

But in this odd meme of the fannish fanzine fen I see something quite right, lying in wait in the dual meaning of the word "should." Should can mean probability or expectation, as in, "He should be arriving at four o'clock," but should can also mean prescription, as in, "You should sit down and eat your spinach, er, broccoli..." I don't think it's *probable* that everyone in fandom who might be interested in, or of interest to, fanzine fandom, has been properly introduced. But I think it *ought* to happen. Cool people ought to meet each other for friendship and happy meme swapping. All of the folks I love should be gathered up in one place for easy storage. The bigness of the world and of fandom should be defeated by the power of the written word. Good should be done, evil fought, and a virtual party for *all* our friends should be thrown. That won't happen. The center cannot hold, and absolute bigness wins. But maybe we can at least trace a few new connections across the circle out here at the

periphery. Because if we can't be a joy to each other, what the hell *is* it all for?

So we're here. The point. The falcon falls. I finally decided to pull together a fanzine of my very own because I feel these connections of love and friendship to all manner of disconnected parts of the great circle of fandom, and near-fandom, and I'd like to pull those strands together and see if they connect (look! A Web!). I've long, long cherished a fantasy of having the money and the benevolent power to have all my friends, family, and loves all gathered in one place. Think of this zine as a pragmatic attempt at near wish fulfillment. Also, as an attempt to prise up the barricade a chink and let a few more people come inside, in hopes that others will do likewise. Scary and occasionally booby trapped as writing letters to fandom can be, I've always found it more rewarding than not. I hope you do too, and that we can negotiate the spiral together for a while. Because that, too, is the point.

But for now, it's getting on time for this production to slouch on toward Bethlehem, to be born.

This essay was originally written as a peeve for the Usenet newsgroup, alt.peeves. For those who are not Usenauts, and for some who are, a little explanation of alt.peeves might help, by way of context. A lot of Usenet newsgroups develop their own idiosyncratic local culture. Alt.peeves has that, cubed and squared (some of the possibly unfamiliar locutions in Charlie's essay are, in fact, peeves-isms – like the recurring prefix Ob-, short for obligatory. (I'm not supposed to tell you that, you're supposed to figure it out on your own as a test of peeves fitness, but I never did take the alt.peeves oath of secrecy – they can flame me later (like they won't anyway))). At its best, alt.peeves is a sustained fugue of intelligent, crafted, witty ill temper and biting misanthropy, a place that takes the phrase "doesn't suffer fools gladly" and gives it teeth, heavy artillery, and serious body odor. The piranha pool of the Usenet, if you will, swim at your own risk, no lifeguard on duty. Still, there's a certain exhilaration to watching a deft flesh flensing machine at work, so long as it isn't your metaphorically mixed ox being gored. Okay, so it isn't my noblest humanitarian urge, this fondness I harbor for the peevers. Still, you might just enjoy Charlie's essay, in which case you're coming to Hell with me.

We're Getting There by Charlie Stross

Recent complaints about the performance of the fiasco-formerly-known-as-British-Rail might strike some of you as fairly predictable: the cross-country Sunday train service is a fairly old UK-specific peeve, and anyone who subjects themselves to a cross-country journey, especially an 800 mile one towed by

a rickety old-fashioned diesel loco along the bad joke of the west coast route probably knows what they're getting into far enough in advance to bring along a supply of paperbacks, sleeping bags, and maybe a tent, survival rations, and emergency flares.

However, I have had a locomotive experience this weekend of such surpassing peevesomeness that I am almost at a loss for words. Never mind the complaints procedure: I'm seriously thinking about legal action. I am

so utterly aghast at what the fuckwitted management of GNER get up to that -- notwithstanding the fact that it costs twice as much and usually takes just as long -- I'm thinking of flying in future.

Normally, getting from Edinburgh to London by train is no big deal. I pick up my bags, toddle out the front door, and start walking uphill. Approximately fifteen minutes later (assuming I survive crossing The Roundabout From Hell on foot -- a peeve of a different colour) I arrive at Waverley Station. Wander down into the booking hall, go to the reservations desk, buy a return ticket and book the return seat on the Friday 7pm service. (Clue: it is a Good Idea to book your seat on the last train out of London on a Friday night ... unless you enjoy sitting in the doorway for 500 miles.) Wander over to the newsagent for a magazine or newspaper or two, shamble to the platform, say goodbye to the GC, and climb onto the train. First Class, of course. At weekends they charge a seven quid supplement over the standard ticket price if you want to upgrade to first, and it's well worth it: no screaming brats, wide, reclining chairs, more upholstery to deaden the noise, and so on. To travel first class on a fairly new 225 express, with a seat at a table ten metres down the train from the buffet, is to experience a level of civilization in travel which you can only extract from an airline by applying a four-figure increment to your ticket price. Normally.

This Sunday I turned up at the reservations desk to buy my tickets at 3:32pm. (Hold onto that time stamp.) I boarded the train at 3:50; it was due to leave at 4.00pm.

At 3:59pm, the senior conductor comes on the PA: "I'm sorry to inform you that due to bad weather this service may experience some delays south of Stevenage. Any passengers wishing to make alternate travel arrangements should leave the train now."

Peeve: I didn't quite realize the magnitude of this threat. I actually had a 90 second window in which I could have leapt from my seat, grabbed my bags and coat, and dashed for the exit -- a golden opportunity to spend two hours waiting on a platform in the most

polluted atmosphere in Scotland (official) waiting for a lumbering 30-year-old cross-country diesel to show: and then to spend six hours, instead of four-and-a-half, chugging towards London.

Peeve²: "Naah," I thought, "we'll just sit in a siding for half an hour or so. I'm comfortable here and everything'll be all right and there's plenty of time anyway." I had allowed almost two hours slack in my travel schedule, in case of train breakdowns or other major delays. So I stayed where I was.

We pull out of Edinburgh and accelerate south. Half an hour outbound, the driver comes on the PA. "I am sorry to announce that due to problems on the line south of Stevenage this train will terminate at Stevenage. Alternate travel arrangements will be made for those passengers wishing to continue on to London. We'll let you know when we hear more."

At this point the penny drops and I think, "Oh shit."

Peeve³: just before we get into Newcastle, the conductor announces "the reason we can't go south of Stevenage is because the overhead electrical cables are down. No trains are getting in or out of London today. When we arrive in Stevenage, we'll put you on a coach to Welwyn Garden City then transfer you to a local train into King's Cross. We're sorry, but long delays are inevitable."

Peeve⁴: the lines were torn down by gales on *Saturday night*. No fucking trains had gotten in or out of London for over 20 hours at the time I bought my tickets. Was there ANY warning of travel delays? Was there hell! Nothing on the departures board. No comment from the ticket office staff. No notices on the platform. Nothing!

Now to get a grasp of the true magnitude of the problem, you need to realize that half the trains running into London south of Edinburgh were canceled ... but still, it seems, nobody was told what was going on. So at Newcastle I was somewhat surprised to find that the almost-empty first class carriage was filling up. The table across the aisle from me was colonised by a family -- complete with two pudgy, sullen, and noisy ten-year-old boys. My own table was colonised, too. All privacy fled; suddenly the first class compartment was full of hoi polloi!

Children running in the corridor. Kids squabbling and bickering at the next table. Unfortunates sitting outside the toilet at the end of the carriage. Crammed to bursting point like the proverbial unbooked second class compartment in the last train out of London on a Friday night. Aargh!

Peeve⁵: I'd paid the conductor the appropriate supplement for traveling in first class. When he came round after leaving Newcastle, however, suddenly first class travel appeared to have been discounted somewhat. Like, for free.

The fully loaded train, now becoming hot, loud, and cramped, lumbered ever southward. Warnings over the PA became ever more doom laden as we approached York, until finally we ground to a standstill, ten miles north of the city. The conductor came on the PA again: "the lines are down south of Stevenage. This train will not be continuing to London, All services are experiencing extreme delays and GNER strongly encourages anyone whose journey is not an emergency to ABANDON TRAIN NOW! ALL HANDS TO EVACUATION POSITIONS! ABANDON HOPE, ALL YE WHO RIDE IN THIS TRAIN!"

Very encouraging. Luckily I'd packed one novel more than I expected to read in a train journey; around this point I finished book #1 and started on book #2, while venturing to the buffet to stock up on emergency rations. I had a horrible sinking feeling about this journey. The train was notionally due to arrive at King's Cross around 8:25pm. From King's Cross to where I am staying is a 40 minute tube journey. The tube shuts down around 12:15pm. So I had started with a 3 hour margin of error ... but it now looked as if we were going to use it all up, cutting things fine.

Add to which: I was staying in a tiny little B&B with about six guest rooms, run by a slightly senile old lady. I *didn't* have keys to my room or the front door, having checked out over the weekend. And the main reason I was staying in a B&B? The friend upon whose spare bed I normally crash while in London (on a reciprocal basis) was in the process of moving. So I've got no back-stop (short of spending eye-

watering amounts of money on a central London hotel for the night).

By the time we got south of Doncaster, things were pretty bad. Various semi-housetrained anthropoids hijacked the PA system and began making half-crazed announcements. "This is the deputy-under-fuhrer in charge of railtrack maintenance. Tomorrow has been canceled by order of the GNER board. We repeat: tomorrow has been canceled by order of the GNER board, to allow time for repairs to the overhead wires. This train will therefore arrive only half an hour early. Thank you." "This is the senior conductor. Please ignore the impostor on the PA system. Will all non-GNER staff please refrain from using the crew-only facilities. This train will not, contrary to libelous rumour, be six hours late. It will only be five and a half hours late." That one got a bitter laugh all round. We were sitting stationary in the middle of nowhere, half an hour after we should have arrived in London -- still more than a hundred miles north of Stevenage.

At 9:30 the buffet staff officially announced: "Free tea and coffee at the buffet. We repeat, tea and coffee are free. We haven't been authorized to distribute free soda drinks, though. Any passengers wishing to use the train phone to contact relatives or make arrangements for their late arrival, please queue at the buffet car." So for the next few hours I had a constant stream of bleeps, pleeps, and inane chatter about "the train's broken down, can you pick me up from Stevenage, daddy?" playing a soothing background Muzak a mere two metres from my right ear.

Finally, at 10pm, we start-stop-shuffled to a standstill somewhere in deepest Hertfordshire. Another announcement. "This is the driver speaking. Er, I wish I didn't have to make this announcement, but we're waiting to proceed into Stevenage. Unfortunately there are five inter-city express trains ahead of us and all the platforms are full. But we should be moving in about twenty minutes."



By this point the brats at the table next to me, unable to simply sit and play cards with their ObParentalUnit, began loudly accusing each other of cheating -- then started throwing rubbish around the carriage. The heating, on full-blast, had brought the train up to something that a Venusian might have considered nice and toasty. An ObLoneMother with ObToddler began bounding it up and down next to me, whereupon it began screaming in my ear. The buffet staff announced that it was closing because they were going on strike. The conductor came round, distributing formal complaint forms that began "We are sorry that our service was not up to its usual high standard ..."

An hour and a half later we finally inched into our final station, still thirty miles outside London and now more than somewhat late. As the witching hour approached I stumbled, glassy-eyed, into that realm of sodium-lit concrete that is Stevenage. I, and perhaps a thousand other passengers, spilled from the belly of the express train onto a platform heaving with bodies. Police were on hand, kitted for crowd control, to direct us over a bridge into the car park, where a never-ending stream of coaches waited to collect the victims and spirit them away to Welwyn Garden City. (If there is a Hell, it probably has conurbations like Welwyn, which is neither a city nor a garden but a concrete shithole adorning the scenic flanks of the A1(M) motorway and providing a haven for offshore cheap-labour assembly plants and cheesy real-estate agents.)

I found myself on a coach, sitting in the back row, some time around a quarter to midnight. The coach lurched out of Stevenage and began driving around the endless concrete crop circles that ring the town like a vast ghost trap aimed squarely at the sanity of its drivers. All was mercifully silent in the coach for some thirty seconds ... until the ObLoudAustralianStandUpComedian decided that we could benefit from his wit and repartee. "Ello darlin', what's in that violin case then? A gun? HaHaHaHa! Ere, weren't you one of the nurses wot answered when the driver asked for medical 'elp in the front of the train?"

His victim shook her head and whispered: "I'm a doctor."

"Oh, right! She's a doctor, everybody! 'Ere we are driving around Luton at midnight in the back of a fucking cattle truck with this heroine, this Florence Nightingale figure! Tell me, what was wrong? Eh? Eh?"

We are not talking the usual run-of-the-mill loud tourist here. We are talking something unusual, prodigious even by the standards of Australia -- a nation renowned for producing foghorn-voiced egomaniacal tourists. We are talking about the ultimate jerk -- a kind of Essex superman, possessed of a grating voice, an ego the size of Jupiter, and a sense of humour that would be considered too lowbrow for the comics page of The Sun. Now place this loudmouth in the middle of a coach full of angry, hungry, tired travelers. Now have him exercise his wit by searching for the quietest, most timid, or most retiring passenger -- someone like the rather mousy doctor, for example -- and use her as the butt of his humour.

Peeve⁶: the bus driver got lost.

I don't really know how it's possible to get lost between Stevenage and Welwyn Garden City. They both sit astraddle the A1(M), the only road of its size for quite a few miles in either direction. But our driver got lost. Cue forty minutes of this fuckwit winding up everyone on the coach, oblivious to the gradually increasing number of DeathStares being directed his way. Finally we wheeze into the station at Welwyn and everybody piles off the bus; I half expect the assembled passengers to go in search of a handy tree from which to suspend the miscreant. But no: we're mostly British, and far too pathetically well-behaved to do anything as uncivilized as lynch someone who richly deserves to expand his understanding of penal theory and practice with the aid of a twenty foot length of hemp rope.

We mill around on the platform at Welwyn like a vast herd of bovine hamburgers-to-be, yawning and shuffling sullenly beneath the gaze of the bored and irritated police. A local commuter train of the rattling persuasion pulls into the station; we flow aboard, and presently there are bodies hanging from the overhead luggage racks, lying in the aisles, and casting avaricious eyes upon the

floorspace occupied by the ObChihuahua which some insane granny has stuffed under her seat -- a dog which is, moreover, quivering in absolute terror, as if it understands just how close to being guest of honour at an impromptu DC-traction-powered barbecue it is.

The cattle car sits there, humming intermittently, for half an hour as the GNER staff try to shoehorn more passengers aboard. They give up on the pitch forks, then finally the hydraulic ram, by which time the train resembles something more commonly found in the eighth circle of the inferno, or perhaps the Northern Line during rush hour.

DING! The train begins to lurch and shudder down the track, gathering speed in a London-wards direction. It is a quarter to one in the morning and there is a storm raging outside. Nevertheless, we slow, stop, and the driver opens the doors, at no less than six commuter stops on the way into town. Maybe it's some kind of low-level spinal reflex; there are NO commuters on this train from Hades, and yet the driver feels the anxious urge to take care, to check *just in case* one solitary stockbroker or weary secretary on the way home from a bender has stumbled into our midst.

We arrive at King's Cross, to find a scene vaguely reminiscent of one of those hideous early '80's "this is what will happen if the Russians nuke us" docu-dramas, only not as nice and civilized. A long line of tired travelers, half of them dead and the other half soon-to-be, snakes round and around the concourse of the huge railway station. Periodic announcements, half-damped by echoes and the deposits of pigeon-shit in the loudspeaker cones, tell everybody who wants a taxi to join the queue on platform two. (To give you an idea of this: platform two is at the other end of the station from the head of the queue, in the tiny garden-shed-cum-passenger-waiting-room where

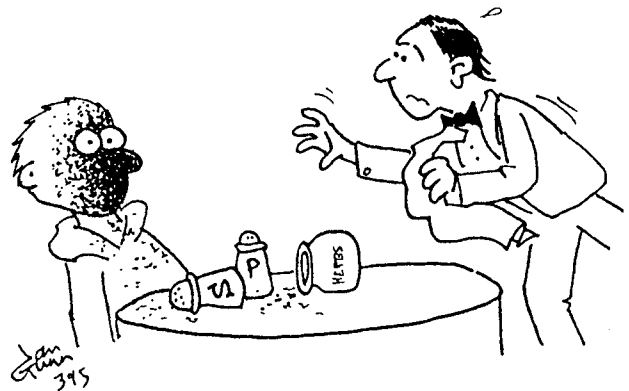
BR employees and shoveling passengers into a never-ending stream of black cabs.)

"Anyone for Portsmouth?" shout the fork-armed devils, pacing up and down the line. "Anyone for Moscow? Enfield? The South-East? You, back in line. No, not over there -- you're in for Simony, that lot are for the high jump for selling Papal Dispensations. Adulterers to the left: gluttons to the right. Harrow on the Hill, anyone? Anyone for a Harrowing on the Hill?"

Eventually I am bundled into a taxi along with four other unfortunates. One of them is trembling in the final throes of tobacco withdrawal, having long since run out of cigarettes. Our driver -- they're scraping the barrel here, definitely scraping the barrel. It's not so much the thick orange fur growing between his fingers as the fact that, utterly unlike any real licensed London cabby, he can't instantly work out where we are going just by looking at us and grunting. My fellow inmates quiver nervously in his presence and speak slowly and loudly as they direct him towards Finchley. For my part, I enjoy a brief fantasy of saying "Edinburgh" when he asks where I want to go. They're paying taxis to take victims to Portsmouth, a mere hundred miles away; surely I shouldn't pass up the chance to sleep in my own bed at GNER's expense? But I'd phoned ahead to the B&B, and the half-dotty landlady muttered something about telling her son to stay up long enough to let me in. So I won't be stuck out in the rain and, yawn ... ah yes. It's now half past two in the morning. It's pissing down outside, and I have never been able to sleep in the back of a taxi. So Woodside Park it is.

Nearly twelve hours after leaving home, I arrive at my destination. The door is open for me; the bed is waiting.

ZZZZZZZZ



SEASONED TRAVELLER

The complexities and accommodations of being an ardent fan and observant Jew have fascinated me for years. Fandom doesn't always make the easiest fit with other cultures fans participate in or interact with, but if you're going to be both a con-going fan and an observant Jew you pretty much have to find ways to make it go.

Cons for Frummies by Debra Fran Baker

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I'm an Orthodox Jew -- a "frummie" to some, though I reserve that term for the "ultra-Orthodox" Jews who wear dark clothes and big black hats and live in selected parts of Brooklyn and Israel. For an Orthodox Jew, religion is more than a system of beliefs or place of worship. It's a way of life that governs, among other things, what I eat, what I wear, how I speak and how I organize my week, which revolves around Saturday, *Shabbat*, the Jewish Sabbath. The Jewish laws governing the Sabbath play an enormous role in my life. I'm also a science fiction fan. My husband Jonathan and I attend a number of conventions every year, and we've served on several committees. In fact, we met at Philcon.

Going to conventions presents challenges for Orthodox, and other observant Jews. *Shabbat* is one of the biggest because there are so many things we can't do, and so many other things we have to do, for *Shabbat*, so that conventions and *Shabbat* can really get in each other's way. There is a feeling that I get on *Shabbat* that I can't describe, and somehow the convention drowns that out. It is certainly not forbidden to go to cons, but we often miss the *Shabbat* peace we get at home. Still, because I often provide kosher food at con suites, I feel like I'm doing a *mitzvah* -- performing a commandment -- in working a con.

When I get ready to go to a convention, the first thing I do is call the hotel as soon as feasible, to ensure we get a room on the floor we want. As this is one of many special requests, I do not mail my reservations. I request specific floors because, among other things, most observant Jews avoid elevators on *Shabbat*. We do that so that we don't violate the *Shabbat* by "working".

("Working" is an incorrect term. It's a poor translation of the word *malacha*, which is closer in meaning to "creative labor." There are thirty-nine *malachot* - broad categories of activities that cannot be performed on the Sabbath. We get them from the Bible itself - there is a detailed discussion of what work was involved in building the Tabernacle in the wilderness, followed immediately by an injunction to obey the Sabbath. This tells us that 1. the Sabbath takes precedence over building the Tabernacle and 2. the activities used to build the Tabernacle are forbidden on *Shabbat*. Among the *malachot* are cooking, using fire, weaving, writing and building.)

Elevators are forbidden because they run on electricity. The restriction on electricity is a puzzle because, as is well known, it wasn't used for anything at the time the Tabernacle was built. We're not even actually certain it is forbidden, but we still don't use it, in case it is. Rabbis have proposed several *malachot* under which it might be included. One is fire, as electricity shares some attributes and uses with fire. Another is cooking, because when passing electrical current, metal is heated and reformed. (This makes sense if you understand that forging metal is also classified under the category of cooking - and incandescent lamps do indeed "cook" the filament.) A third is building, which includes completing something, such as a circuit. Every time you actively use an electrical device, you cause a circuit to open or close.

I try to request a room on a floor close to the main con activities so that I minimize time on the stairs. This means I have to know the hotel well. If I don't, it's usually a safe bet to request a low-numbered floor. I may or may not tell the reservations person why I want this floor. Once, when I did tell them, it backfired. We were going to Phrolicon, which is a very small convention in a very large hotel, so they normally share space with other groups. This particular year, this hotel was the overflow space for a J-hovah's Witness convention. I asked for a low floor, for religious reasons. The hotel stuck us with the other religious folks -- on the 9th floor. Because we arrived too late to change our room, we learned to love the stairwells.

There *are* other solutions to this problem if you absolutely need to use the elevators. One is to keep a non-Jewish friend with you at all times. The friend must be non-Jewish because you can't get any physical benefit or profit from the sin of a Jew, even if the Jew doesn't see it as sinning. You also can't lead a Jew to sin, even if the Jew doesn't see it as sinning - for an observant Jew, it is a sin for themselves. Anyway, if the non-Jewish friend is with you at all times, he is going where you are going. Therefore, he needs to press the buttons and ride the elevator himself. You just go along with him. Note that he is doing this action for himself, not for you. This is important. If you don't have a pet non-Jew, and most folks don't, it is possible to enter an elevator at the lobby with a bunch of other people and hope that someone presses a button close to where you are going. Get out there and take the stairs the rest of the way up (or down.) Some cons, such as Philcon, have their con suites on the top floor. To get there, I get in at the lobby with the knowledge that it will go to the top floor no matter what. My presence makes no difference.

But the best solution is to make taking the stairs as easy as possible. So, if I'm going to Lunacon, I ask for the third or fourth floor. If I'm going to Philcon, I ask for a low floor. If I'm going to Arisia, I want five or six, although seven will do. If I'm going to Phrolicon, I take the third or fourth, which is where all the con activity is. And if I'm running a con suite, I either sleep in the room itself or take an adjacent one.

As I make the reservation, I make one additional special request - I ask for a refrigerator. This is because, like most Observant Jews, I keep the Jewish dietary laws. That is, I keep kosher and follow the laws of *kashrut*. Kosher restaurants are not common outside of heavily Jewish areas, and none of them are open on *Shabbat*, so I have to bring my own food. This means I need a refrigerator to keep it fresh. So I ask for one. Some hotels charge, some do not. Some run out of fridges and I have to make do with coolers. Once we removed all the contents of the minibar and used that as our fridge. Since we ate

none of their stuff, they couldn't charge us for it, but we did leave an extra tip for the chambermaid who had to repack it.

Special requests done, I pre-register for the convention. This usually means that I can be done with registration faster, especially at cons I attend frequently and am known at, where they expedite me. (This is because they know I can't write on *Shabbat*. Writing is another *malacha*. It's a broad category, and it includes business and money - you can't do business without writing, and money *is* business. So I make sure as much paperwork is done in advance as possible to get through a crowded Friday afternoon. One friend of mine, who is habitually late and often arrives at the last minute, has been known to toss credit cards at registration or even the hotel desk and straighten things out after *Shabbat* is over. I don't know how he manages this.)

The day before the convention, assuming I'm only attending instead of working, I'll get whatever food I'll need, and cook it if necessary. That night or the next morning, I'll pack my suitcase. Because *Shabbat* is such an important day, I'll make sure to have at least one nice dress and Jonathan will take a coat and tie. He has a Space Shuttle tie that gets compliments. I will also take a timer for a lamp, prayer books, Bibles and our "Shabbos kit." The kit holds two tea candles, two decorative holders for the candles, a sheet of foil, matches, a silver cup, a small box of sweet spices and a small multi-wick candle. I've forgotten to pack soaps and shampoos. I've never forgotten the kit. I also pack a roll of duct tape. Among the food supplies, I'll bring a bag of twisted rolls and at least one bottle of grape juice. These are also important for the Sabbath.

On the Friday of the convention, I arrive at the hotel as early as possible. Often, I arrive there without my husband. Jonathan usually works until the last minute. At hotel registration, I confirm the floor and the fridge and everything goes to the room. Once I get things stowed away, I register for the two of us. I'm always in a rush because *Shabbat* is looming. Somewhere along the way, Jonathan and whoever we're rooming with show up. We also hook up with as many of the other observant Jews as we can (shouts of "what's your room number" fill the air.)

Then the prep for *Shabbat* begins. We take our turns at the shower. The men who shave, shave. We dress. We prepare the room. Since we can't turn lights on if they're off or off if they are on *during Shabbat*, I use a timer and set it *before Shabbat*. We try to pick the lamp that will give the most useful light without being annoying if we want to sleep before it goes off. We are filkers, so we keep late nights (although as we age, we find late nights are getting earlier.) I guess at when we will return so that the light goes off shortly afterwards. If I get it wrong, it doesn't really matter. We can sleep with it on, and the bathroom light is usually enough if the timed lamp has already gone off. We tape the switch to the bathroom light "On" with the duct tape. If we don't, someone will turn it off, if only the chambermaid the next day. And that means going to the bathroom in the dark, as well as losing what light it provides in the rest of the room.

We store away the *muktza*. (*Muktza* are items that cannot be moved on Shabbat -- either because they are directly forbidden, such as pens and plows, or because their normal use is forbidden on Shabbat, such as a hammer or a video tape.) We usually designate a drawer for the *muktza*, and take it out of whatever bags we might be carrying around with us during the convention, or take what we need and can use out of bags we will store in that drawer - like if I keep a book in my knitting bag. (Knitting is weaving - a *malacha*.)

Then we prepare the door. (One of the most annoying things about conventions is that the upscale hotels we need almost always have electronic door locks. These locks require you to slide in a magnetic striped key, which causes a little green LED light to glow and the door unlocks. You guessed it - it's electric and therefore forbidden to use on the Sabbath. Well, it's probably forbidden. Most observant Jews have ways of keeping the door unlocked. I'd rather not go into them because I don't like advertising how or who. We don't take many valuables to conventions, but others do.)

Okay. Everything's ready and just in time because the sun will set in 18 minutes. Our always late

roommate Zev speeds through the door for his shower. He has eighteen minutes. I don't because it's traditional for women to light the Sabbath candles at this point. Men only light candles if there are no women or girls present. I've set up my *Shabbos* candles on the foil on a table away from the smoke alarm. I light them and make the blessing, and for me it is *Shabbat* and I can no longer do any *malachot*. (If I didn't have the candles or was afraid to light them, I'd make the blessing over the lamp on the timer. The purpose of the candles is to provide light, you see. It's also a symbolic last *malacha*.) My husband, though, has a few more minutes to do last minute stuff if he needs to.

Now usually all the Observant Jews gather in one room. This has been prearranged and word has been passed. Some conventions will even provide a conference room for us to meet, but there usually aren't enough of us for that to be necessary. The men, and those women who wish to, begin to pray the afternoon service and, as the sun disappears, the evening service. At this point, it becomes *Shabbat* for everyone.

(At the last three Lunacons we've been given conference room space. We've also managed to get an Orthodox *minyana*, a quorum of ten Jewish males over the age of thirteen. (Non-Orthodox Jews permit *minyans* of men and women.) Some prayers, such as the mourner's prayers (thank God we rarely have mourners) must be said with a *minyana*. Also, Orthodox services require men and women to sit separately, preferably with a partition of some sort between them. This year, we had such a partition at Lunacon. (It consists of poles, bases, wire and a couple of shower curtains and fits in my car trunk.))

Next we go to the room where we'd be eating *Shabbat* dinner. If we're just celebrating in someone's hotel room, we'd already be there. If there is a sufficient crowd, we prearrange a potluck, with everyone bringing a dish or two, or disposable tableware or soda or the required rolls and grape juice. The food is served buffet style. Though organized ahead of time, strangers are welcome.

(One year at a small convention, there were only four observant folk, and three of us were in one room. Knowing that, I went ahead to a local kosher deli that day and bought a "*Shabbos* special" - a couple of chickens,

some side dishes and a fish dish. Of course, the deli closed before *Shabbat* but I arrived in plenty of time. Even so, the chickens were still warm when we ate them in our hotel room. And I was able to set a proper table and serve the meal family style. It felt like family, too, since the other people were my husband and two friends of ours who happen to live in our own neighborhood and are thus frequent Shabbos guests - sometimes even at the same time. It was nice.)

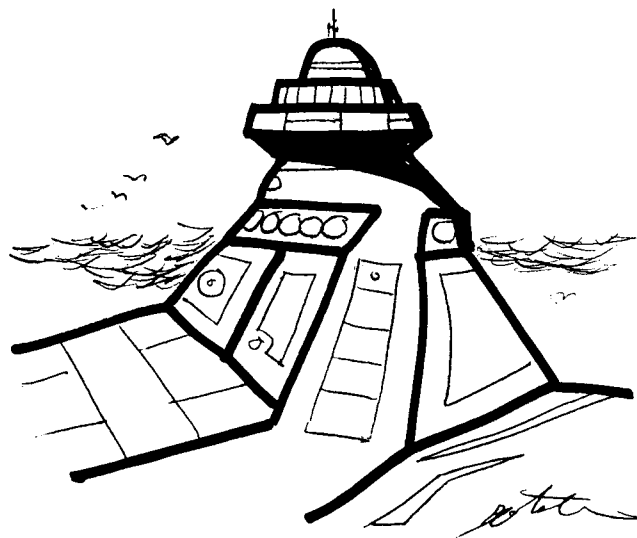
All Shabbat meals, at home or away, begin the same way. We may or may not sing two songs of blessing beforehand, but *kiddush* never changes. *Kiddush* is when the head of the household makes a special blessing over a cup of wine or grape juice - that's what the silver cup is for. At home usually the lease or homeowner makes *kiddush*. At a convention, it may be the oldest married man present; it may be a natural leader; it may simply be the guy who's renting the room. It may even be the man with the best voice. It is usually a man, but women can and do make *kiddush*. The blessing is sung and all partake of the wine.

Then there is a ritual of hand washing. This can be funny because it takes a long time for fifteen people, some of whom need coaching, to ritually wash their hands if there is only one bathroom and one is not permitted to talk between the hand washing and breaking the bread. There is always some guy who washes last and chats with everyone. Some folks use sign language or gestures, and someone else will start humming a tune. (This being a convention, it just might be a filk tune.) Humming is permitted. In fact, that last guy to wash will probably come out humming - he's the type who can't be quiet so he finds some way to make noise. Then the leader takes two loaves of bread and makes the blessing, and breaks it. Everyone gets a bite and we can all talk again. Some people who have panels will cut out early, and some people will only show up for the *kiddush* and the bread and leave. The rest of us will not dawdle because there is a convention out there. We eat and clean up and say the final long blessing after any meal with bread, with the *Shabbat* additions, and then we disperse.

The rest of Friday evening won't be all that different from anyone else's - we stop in at the con suite, go to various room parties, (taking care to eat only foods that meet our religious requirements - most sodas, certain brands of candies and chips, all beer) meet up with friends in the hall, go to a late panel or the dance or the concert. If there is a dealer's row, we might browse there. Browsing can be tricky since I don't have money and can't do business. It's cruel to get someone's hopes up, so if I don't know the dealer I'll tell them I don't have money at present. If I know the dealer, I'll just chat because they all know.

Of course, we don't use elevators if we can avoid them. But there are other uses of electricity around a convention that we have to consider. For example, microphones. There are some big name fans among the observant, who may be called upon to do panels - or even moderate them. And there may be a microphone on the table. Many observant are filkers, too, and someone always has a recorder going at a filksing. Using a microphone causes circuit changes in it and in a speaker. Some will refuse to use microphones (though they can't be pushed away, being *muktza* in and of themselves), but most will just ignore them since they didn't put them there and they have no intentions of using them.

For my husband and me, it would not be a convention without filking. Singing qua singing is not a *Shabbat* conflict. However, musical instruments are, as they are forbidden on *Shabbat*. Most Observant filkers are content to let others bring their own instruments and listen to them play - although Jonathan would prefer it if they didn't accompany him. That's not just for *Shabbat* - it throws him off. There are other observant fen who are



bothered by the sight of musical instruments on *Shabbat*. One, who actually ran the filking for Lunacon, tried to institute an *a cappella*, instrument free filk room. No one came. The other Shabbat/filking conflict is creativity – creative work again. It can be immensely frustrating to get the idea for a great instafilk and not be able to write it down. One filker I know will collaborate with a non-Jew so that isn't a problem.

Another sometime Friday night problem is Philcon and its hotel architecture. The convention area of the Adam's Mark hotel is kept strictly separate from the rest of the building. One exits one bank of elevators, walks across the lobby to another set of elevators and goes down a couple of stories to the conference and ball rooms. There are stairs in the main building and stairs to the convention center, but, for reasons of, I assume, fire safety, the stairs in the main building do not open onto the lobby but outside the building entirely. Observant Jews, at least on the more Orthodox side, do not carry anything in their hands or pockets from a private domain to public domain or vice versa. Carrying is a *malacha*. Most people observe this by not carrying anything at all in a public domain but carrying whatever they want (that isn't *muktza*) in a private one. (Wearing, by the way, is not carrying and it is permitted to wear jewelry as well as clothing. House keys are gilded and made into special brooches or tie clasps, or left plain and made part of belts so they can be worn.)

Domains are determined by physical boundaries. If a piece of property does not have a physical boundary, either natural or man made, such as a fence, it is considered either public property or questionable. The property around the Adam's Mark hotel does not have a fence. Jonathan needs to have his filk songbooks with him at a filksing, but if he has to go through a public domain by stepping outside the hotel to get there then he can't take them to the filk room. However, I took a course on the subject last summer and described the area between the stairway and the lobby doors to the rabbi teaching it. He said the system of overhangs and walls and the size of the gaps between them means that that space

between door and stair is still in a private domain, so that problem was solved for us.

Carrying in public domains is a bigger problem at Worldcons, since there are usually a number of hotels and/or a convention center involved. We cannot carry between hotels, so if we are going to something in a different hotel, we must leave everything behind. I didn't go to LAcon, but some of my Observant friends did. They chose to stay in a hotel that used standard keys instead electronic ones. Since this hotel had no con activities in it at all, they had to make sure that whatever they might need in the main hotel on Shabbat was already there, stashed in a friend's room or something.

However at most conventions I attend, everything is enclosed so there is no problem about carrying anything. This is good - like any normal fan, I'm uncomfortable unless I know I have a book in reach. Reading is absolutely permitted on *Shabbat*.

After a Friday night of filking, some time before dawn, we find our way back to our hotel room. I've probably miscalculated, or we had a better time at the filk than we expected, so the timer has gone off and the room is dark, except the bathroom light. The candles that I lit have long since burned out. We have just enough light to get ready for bed and to find our stuffed animals. Our roommate is not back yet - he's playing Magic or Scrabble or still filking. We settle down in the too-small bed and go to sleep because we have to wake up far too early the next morning. We have to say our prayers, you see.

There are three Jewish prayer services, each of which has a window of time in which it must be said for full credit. The morning prayer should be said between dawn and the middle of the morning. So, we stagger awake and say our prayers, quietly so as not to wake our roommate. He stumbled in around dawn so he's already said his prayers before going to sleep. If we are praying privately and there is no Torah service, the prayers last about an hour or so. Then Jonathan pours a cup of grape juice and we make kiddush once again. Maybe we also break bread, or maybe we settle for a Pop Tart for breakfast and arrange to eat lunch together later. If I'm working in the con suite, Jonathan will bring me the grape juice and a

couple of rolls. I can make kiddush for myself but he's much better at it.

At Lunacon this year we had Torah service. We also had a Torah scroll. These are handwritten on leather parchment and are extremely valuable - tens of thousands of US dollars. A friend of ours, Zev, who is also a member of our synagogue borrowed it from the synagogue and transported it to the hotel, wrapped in a prayer shawl in the trunk of his car. A Torah scroll has its own covering, but you want two layers of protection. To the surprise and consternation of the convention committee, we kept the Torah scroll, well wrapped, in the Ops room - after all, there is always someone there, twenty four hours a day. However, most of the Lunacon committee is composed of non-Observant Jews. This means that they are aware of both the value and the religious significance of the scroll. At least one person felt strange counting money in front of it on the Sabbath, and several were wondering if they should wear a yarmulke, the traditional men's head covering worn as a form of respect.

That *Shabbat* morning, we all met bleary and early in the assigned room and set up the partition. We did not have ten men at that point, but we knew that at least one man was willing to be wakened if we needed him and there were other Jewish men wandering the halls who might be willing to at least step in. Meanwhile, the early part of the services did not require a quorum, so we got started. By the time we needed a *minyan*, we had it (although we did have to wake that man.) There were some amusing bits. I mentioned the prayer shawl. Well, in Orthodox circles, it's traditional for only *married* men to wear them. Therefore, we had exactly as many prayer shawls as we had Orthodox married men, plus one for the Torah. That would have been okay, except that it's also traditional for anyone who gets an honor (leading a service, making a blessing over a seventh of the reading, reading the Torah scroll, lifting and displaying it, dressing in its cover, and reading the additional prophetic material for that week) to wear one. My husband's prayer shawl was passed around to almost everyone, and at one point, Zev, who read the scroll and who isn't married, was

wearing Jonathan's, so Jonathan had to wear someone else's.

It's traditional in many synagogues to perform the morning *kiddush* right there, usually sponsored by a member in honor of some occasion. In this case, it was a day or so before our wedding anniversary, so we provided grape juice and cookies and even had it announced as it would be in a real synagogue. Which this was, at least for the time the services were conducted. Then we folded the partition up, returned the scroll to Ops and went back to my room for lunch.

On an ordinary convention Saturday morning, though, Zev is still sleeping in our room as we attend some morning panels, and, once they're open, wander through the con suite, the art show and the dealer's room. I'll talk shop with the con suite person, Jonathan will browse the artwork for something to buy for our house or his office - he just has to take care that it's something we can display. In other words, no nudes and no depictions of non-Jewish religious practices. This can be rather frustrating at times, but we do have a small collection of SF artwork. He'll make his bids Sunday morning.

Eventually, we will wander back to our room and have a more or less formal lunch (the second of the three required meals.) Sometimes we'll have a group join us, and we'll sing religious songs and maybe even have a discussion on the portion of the week. That's what happened that Lunacon, which honestly felt more like a religious retreat than a convention. Often, though, we'll just be by ourselves.

The rest of the afternoon will progress the same for us as for anyone else. We'll attend panels, hang out in the con suite, meet with friends, perhaps volunteer for such work as we can do. We will make time to say the afternoon prayers, but those were private even at that Lunacon, and they don't take much time. And, if we're smart, we'll take a nap. It doesn't feel like *Shabbat* to me unless I do take a nap.



When the sun is down and we can see three stars in the heavens (or when our calendar tells us it's time), we'll gather in someone's room and say the service that separates the sacred from the profane. Many men make a point of saying the evening prayer at this point, but it's not necessary. The service involves a cup of wine, a box of sweet spices and a multi-wicked candle. The candle says that we can use fire again; the spices fortify us for the coming week; and many prayers are said over wine (or grape juice.) It is then a weekday. We can lock our doors, buy things (just in time for the dealer's room to close), turn on and off lights and ride elevators. I'll take the timer off the light. I still can't eat anything but what I and my friends have brought, unless there

is a kosher restaurant in the area that's open on Saturday night. If there is, we might organize a dinner mission. Otherwise, there are plenty of leftovers, and we basically spend another con evening between the con suite, parties, panels and the filk room. Maybe we go to a concert or the masquerade - just like everyone else. If there is a dealer's row, maybe we buy something.

Sunday morning we catch up on business - we get stuff from the dealer's room, Jonathan makes his art bids and we take care of whatever money is owed us or we owe for food and rooms - usually things balance. We donate whatever food is leftover to the con suite or the staff den and pack our car and then we just enjoy the convention until its time to go home.

Michael Weholt is a fakefan. He wasn't familiar with the term, but he lets me use it on him. I met him on rec.arts.sf.fandom, where he keeps denying being a fan, but keeps getting sucked back into the conversations by the wordplay and the people. When I first asked him to contribute something to Widening Gyre he hesitated over the appropriateness of his doing so, since he doesn't have the right mind set, doesn't consider himself a joiner (you know, a convention here or there might be fun, but he's not a fan or anything ... stop me if you've heard this one before...). I seem to have had the good luck to convince him that it would be okay to contribute, anyway. And now that I've blown my deadline he's very sweetly pestering me already to know when he can expect to see an issue in his mailbox. It's adorable, really. And very much like a fakefan well on the way to becoming a trufan, too. (If I catch another one, do I get the toaster oven?) What follows may be a fannish origins story of sorts. Or not.

POCKET PROGRESS REPORT #1423

by "Michael Weholt"

Greetings to the members of the glorious Committee! Cadre 47, here.

Old Business: I am pleased to report the Imperialist sympathizer responsible for the misguided effort to purchase influence among American politicians has been exposed and purged from the ranks of the Sub-Committee! Long live the People and their Glorious Leaders!

Current Project: As I previously reported, some time ago while searching for ways to enlist the so-called "Internet" as a tool in service to the Revolution, I came across an intriguing phrase. To wit:

"All Knowledge Is Contained In Fan Don"

Through the skillful use of various Search Indians, I succeeded in tracing this cryptic phrase back to its source, a so-called "newsgroup", which I soon identified as the lair of a shadowy organization, previously unknown, calling itself "The Fan Don" (translation: "The Donkey Movie"). I and my team came to the inescapable conclusion that the shadowy "Donkey Movie" is nothing less than the Unseen Hand behind the entire counter-revolutionary sweep of Western Imperialist History.

Of course, while all this was going on, I had continued to indulge in my hobby of conducting research into organic nanoelectronics. As readers of PPR 478 will recall, my experiments with organically-based, self-replicating miniature crystal-radio sets had been a great success, but of course inciting revolutionary thought in the domesticated cattle herds of Great Britain had never been the ultimate purpose of these experiments. No, my work

with the cows of the former Oppressor of Hong Kong had been but a jape, for all along I had known that the Committee could use the Liberator Pixilating Prion, once it was perfected, to eradicate the will toward counter-revolutionary thought in all the Peoples of the World and thereby forever ensure the stability of the Global Order. Long Live the People and Their Glorious Leaders!

And so it came to pass that one evening, while playing idly with my frogs, I suddenly realized that it was here, at the convergence of my two great discoveries, prions and the shadowy Fan Don, that the Many Rivers of My Genius had finally spilled into the Lake of My One True Purpose.

Yes, here was the perfect application for the Liberator Prion!

Readers of PPR 987 will recall that my covert observations of Fan Don had revealed that the true Guiding Lights of the Unseen Hand were located in New York City. This conclusion was inescapable inasmuch as the communications of the New York branch were clearly (to all but my masterful eye) the rantings of a band of certifiable idiots. I and my team (mostly me) deduced from the apparently preposterous nature of these communications that the messages were full of darkly veiled instructions to the Minions of the Donkey Movie, who even now are spread out across the face of the planet, Doing the Dastardly, like baby spiders prowling a dancing web of intrigue. (Every time I think about it, I just get so darn *mad*.)

Knowing that I could achieve a Great Leap Forward (if one may be allowed the use of that phrase) by making expert use of this startling insight, I quickly laid plans to infect the leaders of the shadowy Fan Don with my crystalline receivers. Immediately, I moved my operation to New York (see, Expense Report 41, "Duplicate receipts for as yet unreimbursed items", enclosed herewith).

Steps were taken. My agents uncovered information revealing that a secret meeting of Fan Don's Leading Lights was to be held sometime in late March. As the

dialectics of history would have it, this meeting was to take place at a Dim Sum palace just two doors up Mott Street from my Secret Location!

Not trusting to anyone but myself the crucial next step in my overarching plan, I secured for myself a position as cook at the aforementioned Dim Sum palace.

Soon the appointed day arrived. After careful observation of The Table In Question (glimpsed through hypnotically swinging doors), I identified those members of Fan Don's putative Central Committee who obviously held the most sway (i.e., those who had elbowed their way into the seats nearest the path of Dim Sum carts). Upon further observation, I determined that the Secret Masters of Fan Don were partial to squid.

Working quickly, I injected 45 ccs of my crystalline receiver suspension into several Yo Yee, deep-fried them to disguise the tell-tale butterscotch flavor of the prions, then dispatched a Dim Sum girl, her palm suitably "crossed with silver" (see, "Duplicate outstanding receipt", attached), to deliver my "gift" to the Table In Question.

The Squid was consumed with relish. Soon, however, events took a disturbing turn.

Too late did I discover that the Leading Lights of Fan Don are immune to the effects of my prion concoction. Many suffer from a peculiar type of brain damage that makes it impossible for the crystalline receivers to take root. This damage was apparently caused by long-ago, repeated exposure to an illegal and highly-addictive pharmaceutical (street name: "duplicator fluid").



But dear members of the Committee! Where there's a Will to Power, there's a way!

Sitting with the Leading Lights that day was a Fan Don Novitiate -- one who had never been exposed to the immunizing effects of "duplicator fluid". My exquisite crystalline receivers took root within this unsuspecting novice and soon my prions were flourishing to a degree and in a manner we had never before seen. Tests currently underway suggest similarities between this Subject's brain and those of various barnyard animals, which may go some way toward explaining not only our success with him, but also his habit of occasionally standing stock-still while facing into the wind.

And so, dear members of the Committee, I am delighted to report that all essential elements of my Secret Plan have now fallen into place!

Even now, the curtain is falling! The final fade-out of the shadowy Donkey Movie draws near! The house lights of Final Victory flicker and grow bright! The Colonial Powers shuffle toward the Exits of History leaving behind their Empty Popcorn Containers of Counter-revolutionary Thought! The Workers of the World linger near the Snack Bar of Liberation, hands darkening ominously as their Chocolate Coated Peanuts of Destiny melt with anticipation! And, by the way, check this out: a movie in Manhattan now costs *nine American Dollars!* (See, Form 256 stroke 27A, "Application for Increase in Stipend", attached.)

THE PEANUTS OF DESTINY

On May 13, 1997, a second Fan Donic Confab was held. Our Test Subject was dispatched with the illusion implanted (by me) that he intended to "have a good time". However, before he departed for the meeting and at a level below his awareness (no great stretch, believe me), I had instructed him via his crystalline receivers to conceal in his umbrella a previously-conveyed-to-him PL-235, the pocket version of the popular semi-automatic weapon carried by many members of our glorious People's Liberation Army.

At several points throughout the evening, stupid puns were made, ties in poor taste were worn, exegeses on various no doubt imaginary infirmities were rendered. In short, I and my team were afforded numerous triggering opportunities to send our Test Subject, if we had so desired, into a murderous rage.

In all instances, the crystalline receivers performed flawlessly. Test Subject's eyes glazed over precisely as predicted. The itch to lunge for the Surprise Inside His Umbrella was robust. Indeed, but for the outstanding performance of the governors which I had previously installed, the Great Massacre of Fan Don's Leading Lights would have occurred that very night!

I am informed that training of those agents who will step in to take the place of Fan Don's Leading Lights is nearly complete. Problems causing recent delays (apparently related to the team's inability to obtain elements of an insufficiently fat-free diet) have been completely resolved.

In the unlikely event that doubt remains in the minds of members of the Committee as to the absolute mastery I have over the Test Subject, allow me to inform the members that, yes, this is me (Cadre 47) writing to you, but this report is being typed by our Test Subject himself! I am blocks away, in the Mott Street Safe House, broadcasting to him these very words! Little does he know that he will not be dispatching a "con report" to one of his compatriots in California (as I have deluded him into thinking), but instead will be dispatching my *own* report directly to the *Members of the Committee!!* (Memo to Self-Denunciation File: I'm a show-off.)

In short, all will be in place by the time Fan Don's Leading Lights next meet. You need only, as the Americans say, Give Me The Word and the bloody amputation of Fan Don's Unseen Hand will be a *fait accompli*.

Party on, Communist Dudes! The Revolution Rulz!

(And now, my sweet little meat puppet, my darling Manchurian Pixilate, you may press your "SEND" key! Yes! Yes! Press it *now!*)

It's funny. Comparing notes, it turns out that Geri Sullivan and I have been in fandom for about the same length of time, except she fell in with fanzine fans pretty early on, and I didn't, which somehow makes it seem that she's been around a lot longer, at least to me. I didn't know quite what I bargained for when I asked Geri to write something for my fanzine. Not only did I get a spiffy article, I also got a fan publishing mentor, a great deal of proffered help, and the sense that somebody was out there, batting for me to make a go of this thing. Wow, what a nice feeling that is. Cool lady, is Geri Sullivan.

Some Kinds of Gifts by Geri Sullivan

The first thing Don Fitch gave me during his trip to Minicon 32 was a scare. I met his plane at Gate 27 that Wednesday afternoon. He paused to explain why he'd brought no orchids from his yard in Covina (they'd peaked weeks earlier and were well past their prime), then slung his carry-on bag over his shoulder. My left foot was no longer slowing me down, but we made our way toward baggage claim as though I'd broken it that week rather than three and a half months earlier. Don walked slowly, with effort. We stopped to rest at a trash can between Gates 24 & 25, and I firmly took his bag. Don rubbed his arm.

At Gate 22 we sat down as Don reached for his nitroglycerin tablets.

Yipes. He'd told me of his heart surgery in January, but I thought the stent had done the trick. Don seemed fine at Corflu, just 10 days before. Yet here I was, geared up for a grand Minicon, suddenly face to face with the reality of Don's mortality.

"I don't know whether I should be taking you to the hotel or to the emergency room," I told him. We waited a few minutes for the chest pains to subside, and a few minutes more for good measure. While waiting, Don told me more about the stent that was supposedly keeping his artery open, and how he'd been told the procedure had a 30% failure rate within 90 days. He was starting to think he might be in that 30%. Great.

We made our way at broken-foot speed to baggage claim. I offered to bring the car to the nearby door, but Don felt up to the hike through the terminal, across the skyway, and up to the top of the parking ramp. At least there were elevators.

The nitroglycerin seemed to be working. Don thought he'd stay in the car while I stopped at the Mall of America to buy an air cleaner, but then opted for a smoke outside the Sears entrance, and eventually found me inside. It took a while to settle on a model, and for the clerk to bring it out. Don joked about buying long johns and various garden implements. I began to relax, if only a bit.

On the way to the Radisson, I suggested we alert the Minicon life support people of Don's heart condition when they set up the next day. He was quite agreeable, but I still worried, so we mentioned it to the check-in clerk, too. She promised to pass the word on to hotel security.

I saw Don to his room, storing the air cleaner there until Jeff and I checked in the next day. Then I drove home, fretting.

I knew what to do if things got to the CPR/call 911 level of emergency, but there was a large grey area between that and the little incident we'd had at the airport. Don was going to be in Minneapolis for two weeks -- one week at Minicon and another at Toad Hall. Did he need to see a cardiologist? An EKG? How would I know? If the stent was failing, what was likely to happen next, and when?

I called the nurses' information line at my own medical center and wound up talking to an especially helpful guy who opined that Don probably shouldn't have made the trip. He also gave me some observation guidelines: As long as the nitro was working, we were reasonably okay. If the angina continued longer than 15-20 minutes after taking the nitro, it was time to head for the ER. And Don should see his cardiologist pretty much as soon as he returned home. (He'd put off his check-up until after the Minicon trip.)

That gave me enough of a framework, and a sense of relief. We can't control what's going to happen, but we can control -- or at least direct -- our response to it. And I now had enough information to take whatever next step might be needed, depending on what else Don's heart did while he was here.

While I tended to agree with the nurse regarding the wisdom of Don's trip, given what I'd seen at the airport, I also had something of a fatalistic outlook. If Don's heart gave out, it would certainly wreck my Minicon, but he was where he wanted to be. I was nearby, rather than the usual 2,000 miles away, and Don was surrounded by friends. That isn't a bad thing, or even a bad way to go. Such things are easy to think and say so long as they don't actually happen.

Thursday morning I was back at the airport picking up Jon Singer, who I hadn't seen in years. His gate was at the end of the terminal I'd walked with Don the day before. Jon didn't have any orchids for me, either, but he did show me several pounds of intensely blue mashed potatoes he'd brought for the Minnesota Munchie Movement, and some translucent porcelain he's been working with. When I dropped Jon off at the hotel, I went inside hoping to find Don and tell him of my conversation with the nurse.

Luck was with me; Don was walking up the Atrium stairs just 10 feet from the entryway I'd chosen. I called out and, much to my surprise, he heard me and turned back downstairs. His hearing aids were working much better than usual.



We found a quiet corner and I continued to probe my friend's medical condition. This isn't usual for either of us, but Don is exceptionally good at responding to frankness with frankness and didn't seem to see my concern as overly intrusive. He told me more about the directions he'd been given with the nitro; they were more detailed than what I'd already learned. If the first tablet didn't work within 10 minutes, Don could take a second one, and even a third 10 minutes after that. Then it was time to call 911.

I considered whether to call his cardiologist directly. It didn't seem necessary; there had been no additional incidents or problems, and the single tablet worked the day before. But being able to call gave me some comfort, some small added control over a situation I basically had no control over. Don gave me his doctor's name and while he didn't have her phone number, his prescription bottles had the pharmacy's phone number. I could track her down if I needed to.

I never made the call. Don continued to do well throughout Minicon and the rest of his stay. Thanks to the information I had, and knowing the Minicon life support team would track me down if anything happened, I was able to relax and enjoy the convention and Don's company whenever our paths crossed.

There's a song on the children's album *Free to be...you and me* about helping. The chorus goes: "Some kind of help's the kind of help that helping's all about, and some kind of help's the kind of help we all could do without!" The same can be said for gifts. I certainly could have done without that scare from Don. But I'm rather pleased with what I did with it.

* * *

The second thing Don Fitch gave me at Minicon came from his safe deposit box. The gift wasn't a total surprise. Back in 1995, burglars stole two cameo rings (among other things) from my bedroom dresser. Both rings originally belonged to my paternal grandmother. Upon hearing of the theft, Don murmured, "my mother had a cameo; I've got it somewhere...."

Now, I've been on the receiving end of Don's generosity more than once. This is a guy who explains that the hand-painted, hand-embroidered, hand-stitched silk kimono he brought back from Japan in the 1950s is taking up drawer space he could use to store valuable fanzines, and that it would be a great favor to him if you would take it off his hands. Presuming it wouldn't be too much of a burden, mind you. With apologies for having promised the obi to someone else. 'Ahh, I recognize that tone,' I thought. 'Sometime in the next year or two, Don will show up with the cameo. Probably next Minicon.'

But when he unpacked his chocolate-laden, Trader Joe's-laden bags at Minicon 31, he apologized for not having yet found the cameo. This year, he mentioned digging through his safe deposit box recently. I first wondered what interesting papers he'd found, but soon figured he'd found the cameo there. So I thought I knew what to expect when I opened the carved wooden box he gave me Thursday afternoon.

I'm not an expert on cameos, or any jewelry really. And I haven't had the thing appraised yet, so I can't provide a detailed description. Heck, I don't even know if it's shell or finely-carved stone. All I can really say is that it's so glorious it takes my breath away and offer to show it to you at Loscon, or other upcoming conventions I manage to attend. Well, okay; I can say a bit more than that. The background is translucent. The detail on the woman's face and in the flowers that adorn her hair is exquisite. The oval cameo is set in delicate gold filigree. It can be worn as a brooch or pendant.

Don believes the cameo was a gift to his mother, Edna, from her father when he and the two boys in the family traveled to Switzerland while she stayed home and kept house. Girls didn't get invited on such trips in Don's family, or most any family of that era.

I'd known the cameo was coming, but I wasn't prepared for the reality of receiving it. Again, some things are easier to think and talk about than to actually have happen. Even good things.

We weren't through yet. There was another thickened piece of paper taweling in the wooden box. Inside was a locket. Well, no, it's not really a locket: it doesn't open or close, though it holds two pictures and is meant to be worn as a pendant. An ornamental frame, rather than a case, surrounds the photos. On one side is Don's mom, Edna Catherine Schachenman, and her older sister, Lillian Schachenman, is on the other. The photos are hand-tinted: Edna has short hair, a mass of tight curls, and a light blush on her cheeks. Lillian has long ringlets; both girls have somber expressions. Edna is maybe 6 or 7 years old. The "locket" belonged to Don's grandmother, no doubt, and is about 90 years old.

Old photos rock my socks. During my first trip to Northern Ireland in 1989, Walter and Madeleine Willis shared several boxes of family and fannish photos with me. We gleefully spent hours pouring over the images, identifying some people, guessing at others. They loaned me several for Jeff to copy. Most were pictures of other fans, but my favorite is one from the 1920s. It shows Walter as a 6-year-old, standing with his parents in front of a fountain. I believe the picture was taken in Paris, but my memory may be deceiving me on that point.

The photo orgy had started earlier that same day while we were having tea with James and Peggy White in Portstewart. James had pulled out photo album filled with pictures of Irish Fandom gatherings from decades before. One picture astonished me by being immediately recognizable. "Why, that's from Chuch's first visit to Ireland!" I exclaimed. It was taken at a picnic he'd written about in *Through Darkest Ireland with Knife, Fork, and Spoon*, and while it had been most of two years since I'd read it, I easily recognized the scene he'd described. James and Peggy loaned me that picture and several others for Jeff's gentle hand with a home-rigged copy stand.

But first I showed the pictures to Chuch and Sue Harris in Daventry. This, of course, prompted them to pull out *their* photo albums. Another delightful evening ensued. At one point, Chuck pointed to a fan photo and said, "I'll give you a quid if you can tell me who those people are."

It was as unfair as shooting fish in a barrel. I looked him straight in the eye and mouthed, "Lee Hoffman and Shelby Vick." While Chuck can lip-read only a few people, he was able to read me clearly that time. His jaw dropped, and his hand dropped to his pocket. The one pound coin was mine for simply being able to remember a few of the people Walter and Madeleine identified the day before when showing me another copy of the same picture!

* * *

Photos and their stories really do rock my socks. It was soon clear Don meant the locket for me, too. It was enough of a gift just to have seen it, but there's no one else left in that branch of the family. Don thought it would find a good home with me.

I wore the cameo several days of Minicon, both on a gold chain and pinned to my sweater. Monday afternoon, as I was packing, I figured out how to wear the locket, too. Its opening was too small for either of the necklaces I had with me, so I braided some red, cinnamon-flavored dental floss and used that instead. It worked surprisingly well, although I had to make a second braid when the first one turned out too short.

Don's gifts added another ending to the story of the Toad Hall break-in. I'd already used part of the insurance money paid for the stolen cameos to



purchase an antique gold pin with the word "regard" on it while back in Northern Ireland during my 1995 trip to Intersection. I'd found the pin in a sale at the Edgewater Inn while dining there with James and Walter. It seemed a fitting replacement at the time, representing as it did the warm regard I had for my grandmother, the fond memories of the Edgewater, and my ever-growing regard for fandom. Burglars may steal items, but they don't get to take the memories or even write the end of the story.

But there's a beginning to the cameo story, too. For me, that beginning starts with another theft.

Around 1969, after my sister had gone off to college, I was rummaging around in her dresser, occasionally wearing or using something she'd left behind. Sue wasn't around to notice, but I was careful about returning things to the place I'd found them as I certainly didn't have her permission to even be looking. Among the things I found was a topaz ring she'd been given when our Auntie Bun died. Auntie Bun was our great-aunt, but she was *my* godmother, not Sue's. I used this to mentally justify stealing the ring a few years later, when I went off to college myself.

Sue didn't wear jewelry in those days. I was careful to never wear it around her or the rest of the family. When I married and moved to North Carolina, I even had the ring resized so I could wear it on my right ring finger rather than my pinkie.

In 1984, I went home for a family reunion of sorts. Maybe it was at Thanksgiving. I'd gotten divorced a couple of years earlier, and settled into Toad Hall. I took the topaz ring with me. During a quiet moment, I gave it back to my sister and apologized for having stolen it so many years before.

Sue had completely forgotten she'd ever had the ring; she'd never missed it. By 1984, she wore jewelry, and getting a ring of Auntie Bun's meant the world to her. Much more, she insisted, than if she'd had the ring all along. We went downstairs and laughingly shared the story with the rest of the family. In response, my mother and grandmother *each* gave me a family heirloom ring to replace the ring I'd returned to Sue. Both were cameos. Grandma Dorothy had given Mom a shell cameo decades

earlier and Mom had worn it ever since. The face was worn smooth; only an faint outline of the woman's silhouette could still be seen. Wearing it reminded me of the years it had spent on my mother's hand. The ring Grandma Dorothy gave me directly was one from a set of four onyx cameos her mother bought around 1916 or 1918. Grandma sent me the story of the cameos:

"It was five or six years later that Mother showed them to a friend who had a jewelry store in Kalamazoo. He had a man who worked with gold design the settings all four alike. The larger onyx cameo was made into a ring for my father. It was given to Jack Squier [her nephew] after my father's death. The three others were for Mother, Blanche, and Bernice (her twin sisters). When Blanche died her ring was left on her finger. When Bun died I was left Bun's jewelry and among it I found the two onyx cameo rings. Jack told me Shirley [his wife] would very much like one to match the one he wore so I was happy to give one to her.

"Now you have the other. You can say it belonged to your great grandmother. I think that sounds nice, don't you?"

"The pink cameo ring you have was given to me after Blanche died. The girls each had one, so Bun's pink cameo was also among her jewelry. I gave one to Janice [her niece] and one to your mother."

Bernice -- Auntie Bun -- was my great-aunt and godmother. She and Blanche never married, nor did they have children. In 1918, they bet their father they could earn their tuition for college and began making dolls in an attempt to win the wager. They sold enough to pay for their freshman year, but demand for the dolls remained high while they were in college. Rather than return for a second year of schooling, they formed the Twinsy Toy Company and set up manufacturing facilities in the back of their father's tag factory. (He'd invented a machine that produced wire-strung shipping and merchandising tags around the turn of the century and supported his large family with the business ever since.) There they produced

dolls, stuffed animals, soft alphabet blocks, and other toys for over three decades.

While I no longer have one (or even two) of their cameo rings, I do have several of their patented toys and even a hand-painted 10 foot promotional banner used at the New York Toy Fair, where they had an exhibit from 1920 through the 1940s.

For returning Auntie Bun's ring to my sister, I was given twofold what I'd originally stolen. It's no doubt impossible, but I can't help but wish the same thing would happen to the thieves who stole those cameo rings from me. The rings were probably pawned within an hour of their theft. I hope whoever has them now treasures them.

Still, there was something rather fitting in losing those rings to theft. And theft has again led to my being gifted with yet more family heirlooms. I'll never know what English family parted with the "regard" brooch, under what conditions that happened, or how many people have treasured it since. It's clearly been worn a good deal since it was crafted in Birmingham in 1888. But now it's mine, and I hope to one day choose someone special to give it to -- presuming the story doesn't take yet another twist in the meanwhile.

Don has been part of my self-identified fannish family for some years. Now I have heirlooms to further remember him and his family by. And so the story continues to be written, revised, and passed on, generation to generation....

* * *

The third thing Don Fitch gave me at Minicon was a rubber ducky.

Actually, it's plastic, and it wasn't technically Don's to give. One could even say he stole it.

Don saw the ducky sitting in the con suite during the Monday night Dead Desiccated Dog Party. He handed it to me and I promptly floated it on the top of my freshly-filled beer cup. It seemed like the thing to do at the time.

The duck was a leftover from the year many Minicons back when every Minicon member staying in the Radisson found one in the hotel room upon check-in. There was also a bathtub full of plastic duckies in the con suite that year, but this was one of the inexpensive, flimsy ones we used to stock the hotel rooms. The con suite ducks were of harder plastic and better able to withstand a weekend of play from a couple thousand science fiction fans.

My duck may have been flimsy, but it seemed to like the beer. Hey, it *was* Summit. There's much to like about Summit brews. This wasn't their tasty Great Northern Porter, my personal favorite. I seem to remember the keg was labeled India Pale Ale. Now, I'm not a big fan of India Pale Ales, but the duck certainly was. Over the next several hours, the duck consumed quite a bit of the stuff. I kept refilling the frosted plastic cup. The duck listed a bit more with each filling. The party rolled merrily along. There was a brief escapade with Catherine Crockett down to the Jacuzzi in the supply room, and another with Catherine and Joe Wesson to an unoccupied room for a private smoke. But mostly there was good, fannish

conversation, the kind you can never remember the next day, after the duck's sobered up. It went on for several hours, and the duck sat completely upside down in the cup by the time the poker game ended and I followed Jack Targonski back to his room to crash for the night. Couldn't let that duck near a steering wheel; no, siree.

At lunch the next day, Chicago fan and aspiring pro, Carrie Channel, proclaimed that the duck had *made* the party the night before, and that she'd renamed the party in its honor. Out with the Dead Desiccated Dog, in with "The Duck is a Lush." I couldn't help but agree; the dear thing was *still* upside down in its cup, its head filled with beer. And so its state continues to this day. How stale will the beer get before it completely evaporates through whatever pinhole allowed it in to start with? I wouldn't wish such a fate on anyone or anything, but the duck seems quite happy with the situation. And I'm thinking of picking up a few more ducks to drop into drinks at conventions....

Once again, Don Fitch gave the kind of gift that giving's all about. With luck, or curses, I hope to continue the tradition.



Art Credits

Bill Rotsler - pages 3, 12, 23
 Ian Gunn - pages 8, 14, 19
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