



# 2004

## **Not a lunatic in sight**

Have you ever tried buying a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* at Seven Sisters tube station? Imagine asking for a copy of *Dirty Teenage Sluts* in an SPCK bookshop and you'll be half-way to understanding how I felt. The guy behind the counter reached down furtively to a secret stash and handed one over, quickly covering it with a copy of *The Guardian* I had also asked for.

I'd bought two papers, not because Emmanuelle Béart was on the front of the Torygraph (though that was a bonus), but because I needed something to read on the train to Birmingham. I did have a copy of a Buchan's *The House of the Four Winds* in my pocket, but thrillers don't appeal first thing in the morning. Especially when you're heading to an eyesore like the West Midlands.

I would have thought Birmingham would have a good supply of lunatics to raise a smile or two. But no. Perhaps it was something to do with the two tourist execs who sat

opposite me on the way there - I expect the police cleared out the city centre for the occasion. Though the only policewoman I saw, so fat she could hardly walk, just plodded down the High Street, occasionally reaching inside her jacket for another fistful of sweets to add to the dribbling, churning mass she had already stuffed in her mouth.

Back to London in the afternoon. Even the Virgin train was on time. Dodged a desperate-looking Big Issue seller and four smack addicts as I wandered down Euston Road and then, after a quick greasy spoon in the King's Cross area, caught a 476 and found myself sitting next to the Big Issue seller. She simply smiled at me and carried on reading her book.

Sometimes I despair.

## **Iss Snice**

Apart from being a pleasant detour on the way to the Auld Shillelagh, Abney Park is perhaps the most tranquil spot in London. Originally a combined cemetery and arboretum,

the trees soon conceded room for thousands of graves and monuments to people from all over London. Then space almost completely gave out and, predictably, Hackney Council left it alone until the place became ramshackle, the vegetation had crawled over the graves and people congregated to drink lager and shoot up in the chapel.

Nowadays there's a Trust that has a go at preserving it, giving the public a chance to wander round and inspect graves belonging to Salvationist William Booth, Chartist James Bronterre O'Brien, music hall star Champagne Charlie and the renowned Talbot Baines Reed, author of school stories such as *The Fifth Form at St Dominic's* and *Cockhouse at Fellsgarth*.

Nothing could be more appropriate. The other day I was taking a few photographs when a bloke emerged from behind the tomb of some heroic fireman and addressed me in broken English:

*"Iss Snice. Iss Snice."*

Well, yes, it was a pretty nice day and I said so, moving on to see if I could find Champagne Charlie's grave (sadly, I still haven't). But then I heard this disgusting slobbering noise from behind me:

*"Iss Snice. Iss Snice. Grrrk. Grrawkwk Knah. Grrk. Sshnn. Iss Snice."*

And there was the bloke pointing at his crotch in a most enthusiastic manner.

Naturally, I did the bold thing and ignored him but, after the fifth time of turning round to check this slobbering perv wasn't still following me, I resorted to sign language, pointing to him and gesturing in the other direction. He took my advice. Then began to relieve his tension in the bushes.

He's probably still there now.

## **Whadja expect?**

After supper I headed out for a couple of tins of beer. I caught this great conversation in the street.

*"It's like summer. But it ain't cold."*

*"Whadja mean?"*

*"Well, like, it's really hot in summer. But then it gets cold at night. And now, it's, like, warm."*

*"Well, whadja expect? You've just been standing next to a barbeque."*

## **Shoreditch to Stoke Newington**

I couldn't face getting the bus home this evening. Much too hot, tempers get frayed and the smell becomes unbearable. So I set off from Shoreditch up, what I've now discovered is the A10 - through Haggerston, Dalston, Stoke Newington and beyond...

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I wandered past the Geffrye Museum but there was nothing to see until I got to the corner of Orsman Road. Then I saw a guy with a beard, about 30, twitching and staring across the traffic at a grocery shop. Another bloke came out, not twitching, but younger and carrying his shopping - a huge roll of Bacofoil. He stuffed it in his canvas rucksack as he crossed the street and the two of them haggled over the change before heading off down the canal.

Only slightly further up I was reaching for a fag when a woman came up to me. She was wearing a black bikini-top, a fluorescent-pink pencil skirt, black boots and a white baseball cap. Her left eye was half gummed up.

*"You got a light?"*

*"Yes, somewhere, here you go."*

A few steps on. Tapping on my arm.

*"I'm not a beggar. But..."*

*"No, sorry."*

*"... I've got 50p, and..."*

*"No."*

*"... I only need..."*

*"N.."*

*"Oh, Jesus Christ, you people make me fucking sick."*

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My non-beggar had just gone away when I reached the corner of Middleton Road. I was writing in my notebook when a woman wheeled past in a state-of-the-art electric chair, drawing heavily on a roll-up.

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Then I walked past a man on a bench near the edge of Englefield Road, walking stick propped up against him, supping from a can of White Ace. He was looking at the shop opposite: Durable Fasteners Ltd PRESS STUDS. RIVETS. JEANS BUTTONS. EYELETS.

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That was just before I walked past someone in shorts wearing red trainers and a T-shirt that read 'Je suis cool'.

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The walk through Dalston is normally the most interesting bit. But all I got this time was a bunch of people outside the Railway Tavern, taking in the sun and swigging Kestrel Super from cans. Oh, and the middle class parent with a pushchair and faded, green Wedding Present T-shirt.

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By now I was up at Shaheen's, a supermarket on Stoke Newington High Street. There was a small crowd gathered round the shuttered shop, looking at cards and flowers that had been stuck to the facade. "I tell you, everyone in this area's going to miss him." "Yes. It's so sad. The second youngest one's in hospital. He's critical."

## **Oi Crispin!**

I knew it was going to be a dull day when the first interesting thing I heard anyone say was at about 3pm.

An electrician in a blue boiler suit shouted up to the top of a scaffold: "*Oi, Crispin - I can see your ringpiece!*"

Crispin: "*Oh, you can see that far then?*"

## **I'm from Limerick**

I'd dropped in to get some cash out of the Link machine and grab a bottle of Lucozade to pep me up. As I was paying up at one counter, there was a florid-faced Irishman draped over the other. I went to wait outside for my companion, but the guy staggered out of the shop and came to lean in my face.

*"Do you speak English?"*

*"Yes."*

*"I'm from Limerick." Then: "Do you know what just happened to me?"*

*"No."*

*"Don't laugh. Don't fucking laugh at me. Do you know what happened?"*

*"No."*

*"They threw me out of the shop. Just like that. And do you know why?"*

*"No."*

*"Just 'cause I've got no money. I ask you - is that fair?"*

## **I'm going to tell your dad – or whatever**

So I got on the 253 and went as far as the Upper Clapton Road, the top end of Hackney's 'Murder Mile'. I stopped off at the Crooked Billet, a pub that has the advantage of a garden you can escape from without having to revisit the bar.

This place, had he been passing, would have had Hogarth reaching for his sketchbook. Shabby and smoke-filled, the regulars match their surroundings. So I plump for a pint of Kronenbourg and drift outside to read the new *Private Eye* in the sunshine.

There's a group of kids playing (hitting each other) and wearing pink (girls) or footy shirts (boys). I've been there only minutes when one fat eight-year-old with a blonde skinhead and earring gets hold of a wooden fence panel, two nails at each end, and starts brandishing it at the others. All but one leg it up to the balcony.

One guy, sitting in a group, spots this: "*Oi. OI! What the fuck are you doing?*"

Then out comes the man with the polyester suit, comb-over and plimsolls; the man whose next shave will be given him by his undertaker.

*"Oi! What the fuck do you think you're doing? Put that fucking thing down."*

He dodges after the fat kid, who, with surprising adroitness, double-feints and legs it back into the bar. Comb-over is outraged and the original guy shouts after the kid: *"You'd better fucking watch it. He's gonna get you barred."*

Sideshow over, I get back to my mag.

Seconds later I hear a noise like a wet football smacking into a bus shelter. I turn round and comb-over is getting busy on the corner of the kid's head.

*"Now just you fucking behave yourself. You want more? I've got it. It's cheap."*

Kid starts crying, but it's all show. He's been here before.

But he's forgotten about the bystanders. A woman with red trousers and high heels has come outside. She looks up at the balcony and sees the other kids. She calls to one, a girl, probably about twelve.

*"Hello sexy!"*

*"Hello sexy!"* says this kid.

This goes on a couple more times and, then, without warning the twelve-year old pulls out the pin. Pointing at fatso, she says: *"He pushed the baby off the wall. He did. He pushed the baby off the wall."*

Fat kid is about to take evasive action again, but this time the landlady has come out.

*"Now just pack it in. If you don't stop it, I'm going to tell your dad - or whatever - to take you home."*

Fatso does a lap of the pub. Comes back as I'm leaving and shouts up at the twelve-year old on the balcony.

*"You fat fucker. You fat fucking bitch"*

Back on the 253 for me...

## **Say gangsta**

Back on the 253 today, this time from Euston, up to Finsbury Park and beyond. A bunch of teenagers get on at Holloway with one of those dogs that looks like a pitbull, thinks like a pitbull, menaces like a pitbull - but isn't. After all, no one round here would dare own a dangerous dog, would they?

They slobbered out (where else?) on the back seat of the upper deck. I am three seats in front. A Jamaican woman with her toddler sat on the seat, back one row, to my left. So the teens give the toddler a quick speech lesson. The only phrase of which I understand is: *"Say gangsta."*

After a while they get bored of that and realise the dog has zonked out. Trying, largely unsuccessfully, to bring it round by shouting loudly in its ears, one of the more enlightened zit-heads says: *"He ain't 'ad mushrooms on the bus before."*

That does surprise me.

## **You could do someone an injury**

Police searches are a spectator sport in Hackney. This evening I'd just got a little way past Kingsland Tyres, where a guy was changing a car wheel in the bus lane, when I walked into one of the most good-natured police searches I've seen.

A guy in blue was being searched by a policeman and a very small policewoman. All the shop owners and passers-by stopped for a good look. I took a photograph and walked past.

As I did so, the policeman was turning out the suspect's pockets and, in his first handful, produced a packet of green chillis.

"Chillis?" he said. "You could do someone an injury with those."

## Getting there

Sat opposite a huge transvestite on the tube. Long blonde hair, tanned and cratered face, a pummeled nose: like an Aussi full-back on a hen night. Elbows held high, shielding eyes with a newspaper but highlighting legs like cabin logs.

A near-empty bus at Finsbury Park. Why? Because the driver gets off at alternate stops to examine the engine. Grinds to a halt at Manor House: *"Please get the bus behind. This one's leaking."*

I go and look. Sure enough it's leaking, a light coloured fluid dripping on the tarmac. Not oil, but could it be petrol? I light a cigarette to check. No. Must be water.

Smoking I look at the newly-crashed Vauxhall Astra on the kerb, roof bowed in and headlight hanging out like a dead cat's eye.

Stamford Hill and into Safeway's. Old Turk sitting in the basket space next to one of the express tills. Greasy grey

hair, garrulous, watched benevolently by the security guard, bin bag on the floor nearby.

*"Allo. You alright?"*

Getting there. Yes, definitely getting there.

### **A long passage and quite shabby**

What makes this area such a tinderbox is not that petty insults, jibes, and ill-chosen remarks quickly escalate into full-on confrontation and violence, but that so many people go out of their way to provoke it.

This evening was a good case in point. I was coming out of the tunnel at Seven Sisters tube station that connects it with Seven Sisters Road. It's a long passage and quite shabby, although London Underground has made a recent effort to resurface it. Walking ahead of me was a tall, bulky man - the sort who shaves his head in a self-delusional attempt to hide his baldness.

He was white, wearing black polyester trousers, a cheap white shirt and dull Air-Wair soled shoes. He had a thin gold wedding band on his left hand and a similar, silver version on the little finger of his right. Dangling from the belt loop was one of those dog chains that some people attach their keys or wallets to. He was carrying a dirty, yellow rucksack with black shoulder straps. His glasses had a lighter yellow tint.

This tosser was walking down the left hand of the tunnel, eyes fixed dead ahead of him. And every time someone came towards him on his right he would subtly move nearer and, at the last moment, flick out his upper arm and elbow and slam it through that person's shoulder. A subtle movement that only someone watching from behind could say, for certain, was deliberate. The first woman stood shocked and looked back in amazement, eyes pricked with tears, massaging her shoulder. Then he struck a Rasta, who totally ignored what had happened. And, finally, as he reached the end of the tunnel, he piled through another woman, who was again too shocked to retaliate. Unluckily he didn't try his snide game on someone bigger and more violent than him. But if you know someone who matches the

description, and who catches the bus from Finsbury to the Woodberry Downs estate, do let him know what a dislocated shoulder feels like.

## **Piece of Piss**

Oddly enough, Hackney residents are quite low down in the league of street urinators. Casting my mind back over the last few years, only a handful of examples springs to mind.

Firstly, there was the street drinker a while back, pissing up the wall of the small Stamford Hill Safeway's. I was walking past him at the same time as a Spanish woman, who remarked to me: *"That's disgusting. I see it every time I'm here. I never want to come back."*

Then there was the guy taking a leak in a railway carriage as we were heading up to Clapton station. Astonishingly, no-one said a word.

And then, I'm ashamed to say there was me - taken short after some beers and forced to head for a secluded tree off

the Guinness Estate. But that wasn't a public performance, so it doesn't count.

I do find this otherwise urinary reticence among Hackney-dwellers all the more surprising, particularly as there's hardly a public toilet left in the borough. Our local facilities: underground, flooded, blocked with litter and closed. Until recently there were trees growing out of the steps.

How incontinent are the people in *your area*? What spectacular feats of urination or worse do you see on a regular basis?

I'd have to nominate either Tower Hamlets or the London Borough of Ealing. The former is a strong contender by virtue of the army of street drinkers who water the grass at Paradise Row, not to mention the alkie and drug addicts who piss and crap on the stairs of Cambridge Heath station.

The jewel in the crown, though, is Ealing: the first place I saw a woman drop one in public (next to a bench outside the Broadway shopping centre) and where I witnessed a guy

take a leak in his trousers *without stopping drinking*. Good effort. But now it's in your hands, so to speak.

## **You've got fuck all**

A crawl to Birmingham, delirium setting in, pouring out onto New Street and out for a fag. Back in, an hour's wait, into the pub, a lime and soda, a group of drunks, a porter taking pity and telling the man with no money how to get to Wakefield, the man with no money flashing no smile. Colleague heading off for another bottle to sustain the final leg. And off again.

Then out at Reading. Colleague feels the call of nature, heads into the entrance hall. Quickly comes out and tells a bloke in a suit, confidentially, shouting: "*We're at the wrong [pause] fucking station.*" I think she knows the man. I've looked at the sign (we're in Oxford) and, reasoning that she went to university at Oxford, she knows this guy. Guy and I look at each other. Both confused so I wave at Colleague. She comes back over. Trains to Paddington are available, so all is not lost. We get the next one.

It's small and it stops at all stations. A pair of small seats. Peace. Out with the strawberries. Then, forcing open the closing doors, a new friend. Friend is drunk. Friend is chatty. Friend is soon spread out on the six-seat section next to us.

*"Look at you. Why are you lookin' at yer phone. She loves you.*

*"But..."*

*"No buts. I don't care who she is. She wants you."*

*"But..."*

*"No buts. If she looked at me like dat, I'd go home and mek love to her, so I would. Do ye know what I used to do fer a livin'?"*

*"No."*

*"I wes a pickpocket. But I don't do no dippin' now. No. I gev up. I've got a wife in Swindon."*

*"Why did you stop?"*

*"Well, I look at people and I say to meself: 'Do they deserve it? And if they do, well, then I teeve off em. It's dem bastards dat won't talk to you, give you de time of day. It's dem I steal off."*

*"But I thought you said you stopped thieving."*

*"Weel, I have. But then I size people up. And if I don't like 'em I dip 'em. But I only steal off Pakis now."*

*"Have a strawberry."*

*"No I won't have a strawberry. I steal off poofs too. You're not lookin' at her. Yes I steal off poofs. And Pakis."*

*"Have a strawberry."*

*"No, I won't have a strawberry. And I tell yer what. I hate fuckin' junkies. Dey just steal and jack up. I drink yes, but I'm no junkie. I hate fuckin' junkies."*

*"Have a strawberry."*

*"No, I won't have a strawberry. No I size people up. Now, someone like you. I saw you. You've got fuck all. I wouldn't teeve off you."*

Colleague: *"I got robbed the other day. Guy came up and asked me for change and I gave it to him. He said, you don't trust me. So I gave it to him. And he ran away. And I chased him."*

*"Did he have brown eyes?"*

Colleague: *"Yes."*

*"Never trust a man with brown eyes. Me mother, she told me 'Only trust people with blue eyes'. I'm going to Reading. Haven't got a ticket..."*

*"Have a strawberry."*

*"No, I won't have a strawberry."*

*"Where are you from?"*

*"I told ye that. I'm from Swindon."*

*"But where in Ireland are you from."*

*"Limerick."*

*"Have a strawberry."*

*"No, I won't have a strawberry..."*

And so on. And so on. But he did get off at Reading. With the rejoinder: *"She loves you. No. Stop. I don't care. I wouldn't care if she was me sister, I'd still make love to her tonight."*

And off. And so am I.

## **Tea tray on legs**

If you like eavesdropping on high-quality conversation, you could do worse than drop into the bar parlour of the Grapes, in Limehouse. Yesterday's gem emitted from a Frenchman, telling a companion about the problems he had with the

Russian Mafia when living on the Costa de Sol. But he was overshadowed by the dogs. The whole place seemed to be filled with them, and it was impossible to work out which punter owned which woofer. But the stars of the show were a huge German Shepherd and a small brown thing that looked like a "tea tray on legs" (a drinker's appraisal, not my own).

These two were frisky, feisty and full of tricks. Tea tray's speciality was to rip up tissues and then jealously defend the pieces from the German Shepherd. This generally pissed off the bigger dog, who would react by putting tea tray into a half Nelson. And when they tired of that, they'd try and bite each other's teeth. Or indulge in a bit of sex play (voice from the throng: *"Oy, you little slut! Just stop that right now. You little tart!"*).

But the best trick was performed with the aid of a slightly pissed bloke (the owner?). Each dog faced each other. A crisp was placed on the floor in front of each. And neither was allowed to move until the signal was given.

*"Now!"*

Straight in there and back up for more crisps. And violence.  
And sex play.

*"Just bloody stop it you whore! Non-doggy people in here might think something's wrong, when there's not."*

Well, nothing wrong with the dogs anyway.

## **The shoplifter always goes first**

This evening I did the usual round of Safeway's, having failed to do any proper shopping this week (with the exclusion of bogroll and coffee). I basketed my stuff and headed for the fag counter, having fewer than the magic six items (none loose) and being in need of some more tobacco.

It was a long queue, and two minutes into it some guy abandoned his basket on the floor in front of me. I dutifully shoved it along for five or six minutes, keeping the man's place, but he came back and picked it up and headed for an even longer queue, clearly unable to believe that I wanted

to do him a kindness. Perhaps he thought I was a Jehovah's Witness or something.

Anyway, I got to the front, unloaded my stuff. And just as the kiosk man grasped the neck of my (two for the price of one) Ribena bottle, a huge security guard rolled up with a pretty Eastern European girl in tow.

To the kiosk man: *"Stop"*

Bleep. Kiosk man lasers the Ribena bar code and begins to look interested.

To me: *"Sorry sir. The shoplifter always has to go first."*

I'm looking at this guy. He's big. He's Security. And he seems to be guarding the shoplifter. But I'm a tolerant man and I start the nodding routine.

Big man to kiosk slave: *"Now put these through"*, moving two bottles of wine into checkmate position on the counter.

Kiosk slave: *"I can't."* Points to my shopping. *"I've started to put these through."*

Big man, bloody angry: *"I told you. The. Shop. Lifter. Goes. First."*

He gestures to two hooded teenagers being escorted through a private door. *"That's why I have to be on the floor. I'm taking her to another till. And always. Remember. The. Shop. Lifter. Goes. First."*

He took the thief to the nearest till and she paid up and got chucked out.

*"What was that about?"* said the shopper who had been jostled out of place.

*"Oh, she just stole the alcohol so he made her pay for it,"* said the checkout girl.

He did. And unlike me, the thief probably got home in good time.

## **Converting the Jews**

Ladies and gentleman, allow me to introduce you to our local preacher. He wants to convert the Jews.

He's been a popular attraction for a number of years. His pitch: outside the small Safeway's on Stamford Hill. His slot: the Saturday and Sunday Sabbaths. His delivery: loud and theologically suspect.

Very loud in fact. He delivers his rather wonky interpretation of the Bible in the "*Zacchaeus. COME - DOWN - FROM - THAT - TREE!*" style. But with a lot of Hell thrown in; most of which would make Dante wince and have the effect of uniting the Pope and Ian Paisley in laughter. And the local Jewish teenagers love it. They are the most enthusiastic laughers, pointers and critics of us all.

It was a great disappointment when the preacher vanished for a while. But our joy was glorious when he came back, having discarded his silk robes in favour of sackcloth, and began all over again - handicapped by the loss of his voice. From such stuff were saints like Francis made - though I bet our man never inspired a sheep to genuflect.

Our preacher is one of many. One of my favourites is the woman who gets on the 253 or 254 in the mornings, holding a clear plastic mapcase which displays the simple notice: "REPENT". She stands near the exit and exhorts us to come back to Jesus.

Then there's another fine fellow. This evening, my other half came back from a trip on the 38 when a man got on. "You know who Santa Claus is? DON'T YOU? That's right - SATAN'S. *CLAWS!* The Devil has *TAKEN OVER CHRISTMAS!*"

## **Have you washed your armpits?**

Out of work, round the corner into the Edgware Road. Dirty grey hooded top, clutching a carrier bag, comes up and stares in my face: "*Nyy Nyyi Nyurnay?*"

"*What?*"

"*Is this? Thursday?*"

"*Yes.*"

Hooded top isn't reassured. Carrying on round the corner, into Crawford Place and the Windsor Castle. Beer bellies and an old queen, theatrical voice and a careful coiffure. I order wine.

Old queen to barman: *"Have. You. Washed. Your armpits. Today?"*

*"Yes. Why?"*

*"You keep scratching them."*

Pause. *"If you dare bar me, you will lose a fortune by the absence of my weekly custom. Pour me a Guinness."*

He's drinking pink wine, but no matter. He gestures to the Bass pump. Changing tack: *"Well my dears. I'm going home. And when I get there I will find three Norwegian sailors waiting for me. You three aren't even married".*

The Windsor Castle has a near-lifesize Santa. Put money in it and it dances like a cripple.

Hackney quiet as hell. Someone let me go down the bus stairwell first and the checkout man apologised for dropping my change.

# 2005

## **God didn't create the world**

There's not much percentage in converting the Jews these days. The bottom has dropped out of the market. But, as I've mentioned once or twice before, one of my favourite local characters is an avid believer in the sport.

So it was with delight that, after failing to secure any mousetraps in a nearby hardware shop, I saw my old friend was at his post. My other half was in Safeway's securing a bit of cheese and an apple or two, so I hung around outside and waited for the preacher man to map out my path to salvation. He was superb. So I whipped out the notebook and got scribbling. And sure enough, along came gem number one: *The people who translated the Scripture. They LIED about it! God was so ANGRY he visited them in 12 HOURS!*

Superb: the old God-was-misquoted angle. But the next offering would have got the chap burnt in the Middle Ages,

and on a windy day like this it would be rather unpleasant to see his melted fat adorning the walls of the supermarket.

*God didn't create the world! His son JESUS did it!*

Steady on! When did he do that then? After he was born, or before? But my friend is not a man to stick to a topic if he can help it. He dives into his text every minute or two, drinks in inspiration and starts afresh on a new exegesis. As I headed home, the last I heard was: *God thought it better for man to lose his foreskin than his freedom. But since the days of Adam, circumcision IS NO MORE!*

When he gets lynched, I'm going to miss this man.

## **It's not shy**

In the pub. Middle aged man and woman propped on a pair of bar stools, leaning on elbows, facing each other. Man is speaking: *"There was a time I would have defended her. It's not shy. It's not reserved. It's..."*

*"It's German arrogance."*

## **He went to college?**

Just back from a long week, conducting 'workshops' of the non-boiler-suited kind. Weariness on Tuesday, ritual humiliation on Wednesday, success and laughter as soon as I stopped caring. I left my gloves in King's Lynn, my trousers in Great Yarmouth and my soul in Liverpool.

A conversation, overheard on the stretch between Norfolk and Nuneaton. Two Asian guys, about 30, one cultivating emphysema and the other narcolepsy. In between the one's coughing fits and the other's catnaps...

*"He went to college?"*

*"Yeah. He ain't been back to see his family except at Christmas. And summer."*

*"No way. How'd he get to college?"*

*"He went to some college in Birmingham. They sorted him out with a qualification."*

Pause, cough, sleep, pause and pause and cough some more.

Then: *"Can you drink and drive a train?"*

*"It's not like a road, man. You just have to make sure you don't come off the tracks."*

## **There's pink bits**

Travelled north today. Usual haul from London up to Newcastle, then colleague and I hopped onto the Vandals' Express to Sunderland.

Twenty minutes later, we're standing outside Sunderland Station, lost and looking at an empty taxi rank. Tip off from an old guy who tells us we want the main entrance. We get there, hop into the first taxi. Driver opens the boot so we can dump in the luggage. Quick bag count and I realise my rucksack's still on the train.

Dash back. Train's gone. Back again to the taxi, where the meter's ticking along nicely. Colleague and I decide to head for guest house, open negotiations with the train people from there. Half way to destination, driver remembers something. "There's two guys down at that station. They're there all night."

Back to station. No harm in profiting from a little good will.  
Find a porter. He hits his office and calls Newcastle.

*“Come back at five-to-ten. If they’ve got it, can you be here at 10.20? If not, they’ll send it to god-knows-where, miles away.”*

I can be there.

*“Get yourself a coffee at Burger King.”*

Anything for a laugh, so off up the stairs and into the street.  
Miss the Burger King behind me. Head past a  
Wetherspoons with a few tarts hanging round the entrance.  
Then along by a Yates’s and a nightclub, before wheeling  
round and discovering the place I want.

Distressed Burger King. Chairs all up on tables, bar a circle  
at the front. Drunken punters, all wearing “St Pat’s Hats”  
shaped like a pint of Guinness, are sitting slurring at each  
other. I get in line. It smells bad, but I’m not going to get  
anything else. I’m hungry.

A Pat in a Hat drapes himself over the counter and starts berating one of the burger flippers.

*“Did you know it’s illegal in this country to sell uncooked burgers?”*

Burger Pawn looks embarrassed, has no dignity, just wants out. Hat with a Twat continues.

*“See that brown bag?”*

Clearly not.

*“That brown bag,”* continues the Twat. *“The one sticking out of the bin. Fetch it”.*

Burger fetches it. Hat pulls out a carton and reveals a half eaten burger.

*“Look,”* he says prodding it. *“There’s pink bits. If you sell burgers like that you’re going to poison people.”*

I get a hot chocolate. And nearly step in some vomit outside.  
But back at the station I'm on the phone to colleague. Porter  
appears. Thumbs up and says: *"Twenty past ten"*.

My hero.

# 2006

## **On yer bike...**

Returning from Somerfield with essential supplies: potato waffles, the *Guardian*, the *Hackney Gazette* and a bottle of sherry. The woman next door is talking to a boy who is standing inside the gate to my house. I greet them and hand her a parcel that I've been looking after.

10 minutes later, the sherry's in the freezer, I'm at my desk and someone is doing percussive on the entryphone buzzer. I pick up the handset.

*"Come down please. Come now."*

Oh hell, it's bound to be another confidence trickster. The last one wanted 70p to get a bus to the hospital to see his daughter. Yeah, right. But I liked his acting and gave him about a quid in one pence pieces.

So I go down. There's a woman at the door.

*"There's a coloured boy trying to steal your scooter."*

There isn't. I haven't got one. But the downstairs neighbour has got a yellow horror with crappy transfers. Still, I suppose it's a bit much to let someone filch it.

*"He was down there. He had a spanner or something. He's gone round the corner."*

Great. Thanks. But if you think I'm giving chase, you're wrong. So I opt for the cop out:

*"Thanks for telling me. I'll keep an eye out."*

So, back upstairs. Is the sherry cold yet? No. Is there anything compelling in the *Guardian*? No. Can I get motivated and return to work? No.

I'll check on the scooter instead.

There he is. And it's a screwdriver he's got now, even if it was a spanner beforehand.

I tell him to fuck off. He begins to fuck off. I tell him I've rung the police. He pulls faces and fucks off that bit quicker. I go back and check on the sherry.

Then I have a good idea. Why don't I actually ring the police?

I get the number for Stoke Newington police station and ring it.

*"Is that Stoke Newington police station?"*

*"No. It's a switchboard."*

Of course it is.

So I tell her my story, suggest one of those efficient, new community support officers wanders by from time to time so that scooter thief considers taking his custom elsewhere. She puts me through to someone. I tell him my story. He says he's not based in my area. So he takes my name and phone number. Someone in my area will ring me back soon.

And now, over three hours and many scooter checks later, have I heard a word from our friendly, neighbourhood police force?

Of course I haven't.

### **You look like one**

I thought I was being a bit idealistic, so I popped into the Swan on Clapton Common for a pint and a reality check. It never fails. Sitting in the beer garden out the front, scribbling in my notebook, I watched a party of two chubby women and a guy (with a fag tucked in his baseball cap) drink champagne out of glasses more suited to gin and tonic. And in the background I could hear only the traffic and the ubiquitous loud mouth yelling at a woman who had just arrived:

*"Oi darling. You're a schoolteacher, ain't you?"*

*"How did you know that?"*

*"You look like one".*

## **She should know**

Old git in Morrison's this morning. Not me, an older and more authentic one.

He shuffles up to a woman who is busy stacking the shelves with salad and vegetables. I missed his opening gambit and her reply, but there was no mistaking his come-back.

*"Ere,"* he hectors, in best Alf Garnett style. *"Are you French?"*

*"No,"* says the woman. *"I'm Romanian".*

And the response? Mild embarrassment? A slight dose of faux self-castigation? Perhaps a wish that he'd learned more about Romania when he was younger and had the chance?

No, of course not:

*"Are you sure you're Romanian?"*

## **I can drink what I like**

I suppose I'm lazy, but when I've picked up a load of shopping, I'll sometimes get a bendy bus from the supermarket and travel one whole stop to slice a few hundred yards from the walk home. And if I have so many bags in my hands that I can't get my Oyster card out of my pocket, then that's just bad luck too.

A bit like today, when I hopped in the sliding doors of the 149. Straight ahead a mother, with child in pushchair and friend at her side. Sitting nearby, facing the side of the bus, a woman of about my age. She was wearing a baseball cap, emblazoned with English national flag, and she was wearing slip-on shoes with a puckered elastic rim, which made it look like a toothless witch was trying to swallow her foot.

Not that there was much chance of that. As I got on, baseball cap was kicking her shoes on and off and intonating in a voice that sounded like a cross between a Whoopee cushion and that bloke with a strange, pent-up voice who used to be in the Police Academy films (no doubt someone incredibly famous, but it's been a long time...)

*"Iyyymmmnnn airline piiiilot, dontchano..?"*

Then, getting up and staring at the mother.

*"How dare yyyyou call me nnnn alcoholic? I PITY you. Yyyyou shhould just FUCK off. I dnnn't drink. OK, I knnow what you thinking. I DO drink. I drrink maybe. Maybe. I drrink maybbe, oh, four bottles of wine A YEAR! I bet yyou are n alcollic. I bet you go home with your FUCKING baby and ddrink yoursel sstupid. You fucking MAKE ME SICK."*

At which point she sat down again.

*"I DON'T FUCKING DRINK".*

And, alas, it was time to get on the bus. And as I left, two of the street drinkers from the top of Stamford Hill, cans at the ready, got on and adopted the position, backs to the doors, of people who knew how to get off in a hurry. I suppose the bus officials up by their normal patch have

learnt to keep an eye out for them, being such obvious fare dodgers.

Unlike me. I just forgot to swipe my Oyster card - again.

## **Fashion victim**

I try and fail to do many things, but looking fashionable isn't one of them: I just don't try. Lacking any sort of sartorial ambition, and living the sweet life of a freelancer, I'm usually happy to essay forth into the local area wearing whatever I've absent-mindedly scraped off the floor that morning.

Today was no exception. I've just returned from Somerfield, where I went shopping in an old t-shirt, a comfy old jumper, trousers a couple of inches too short in the leg, and a pair of blue canvas shoes with white, rubber soles, scuffed about and worn into cheesedom on my recent holiday in Devon.

On the way back down my road, I saw a huge teenager and his mate both trying to perfect some weird, swaying walk. At least I think they were; because if they weren't, they're

both slated for an operation to remove foreign bodies from up their areseholes.

I've seen them about for years, but I must have been staring too hard because the huge teenager stopped me and said something.

I pulled my headphones out of my ears (could Sonic Youth, even at this late stage, be endowing me with some street cred?)

*"Sorry?"*

*"How much were your creps?"*

*"My what?"*

Our eyes all headed downwards. There were my cheapo shoes underneath a half-mast trouser leg.

*"Your creps".*

*"My shoes?"*

*"Your trainers. Your creps. Where did you get them?"*

*"Oh. I got them at the seaside. They were 15 quid".*

Their eyes met. Not a hint of a pisstake.

*"Cool!"*

And here I am, bewildered. High Court judges get a bad press...

## **I'm trying to chat you up**

Pretty soon I heard someone speaking to me. It must have taken me quite a while to notice because, by the time I did, she was half way from the bar (where her drinks were) to my table (where I was) and speaking quite loudly. Most people speak loudly if they are determined to break in on my reading.

*"What's in the news?"* she said

It's a sad fact, but I'm much better at observing strangers than swapping banter with them. Cheapo public schools can do that to people.

So I went pink and muttered: *"Oh. Nothing much really."*

*"You must find it interesting if you're reading it"*

*"Oh. I'm. Just. Erm. Reading, erm, reading the..."*

*"Look. I'm trying to chat you up. You must be able to get me interested in it."*

Embarrassed pause.

Then she said: *"My dad's just died"*

*"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."*

*"Why do people always say that?"*

*"Say what?"*

*"That they're sorry?"*

*"Well, it's sad to hear isn't it?"*

*"Is it?"*

*"Well, you're obviously sad."*

*"Am I?"*

She was really. Her eyes were red and her lip trembled when she forgot to tell it to stop.

*"Look. I've just got to talk to a complete stranger."*

Then out it all came. Her father was a straight sort of a guy. He used to come home every evening and have one drink and one cigarette. Her mother had been married four times. She had a habit of marrying bad men.

*"I don't work any more," she continued. "I bet you have a good job".*

*"No. I gave all that up."*

*"Did you? Why?"*

*"I couldn't stand it any more."*

*"So you don't do anything now?"*

*"Well, I freelance. I get paid for some writing I do."*

*"Oh that doesn't count."*

*"So why did you give up work?"*

*"I was in a trial."*

Here it comes, I thought. She's an axe murderer. Left her last husband in bite sized chunks for the crows.

*"Oh."*

*"I was the star witness."*

*"Oh? What was the trial about?"*

*"People always ask me that, and I don't like telling them."*

*"Why not?"*

*"Because it'll make you sad."*

*"So I have to choose between the suspense of not knowing and being sad?"*

*"Yes."*

*"You'd better tell me then."*

*"It's not nice. It was a paedophile trial."*

*"Oh. Someone you went out with?"*

*"One of my mother's men."*

*"Oh. Did he get convicted?"*

*"Yes. He got eight years."*

I think it was eight years. Apologies if she's reading it and it's not. It wasn't as though I had a notebook with me at the time. I do know it sounded like rather a lenient sentence, although I've no idea what the details of the abuse were.

Then, continuing. Or this may have been earlier in the conversation.

*"Have you got a partner then?"*

*"I'm married."*

But I do remember how the conversation ended.

*"Look," she said. "I'm sorry to have told you all these things. I'm going to go over to my brother."*

I looked up and saw a guy who drinks in there every afternoon. No flicker of recognition. Can't be him.

*"I wanted to chat you up. You're very good looking. If ever you're single..."*

*"I'll know..."*

*"Yes..."*

And with that she moved off to the other end of the pub to find her brother, I finished my pint and got another. And then I reread the paper in a daze.

She was just my type of person.



# 2007

## **Please shut up**

It might be a reflex criticism to knock the reserved nature of English people, but I think it's one national characteristic that should be made compulsory. Especially for people who consider themselves to be jovial.

I'm not normally a daydreamer, but I do have the odd Utopian vision. The one I had today was of queuing quietly in Morrisons for my shopping, paying for it and then going home in peace.

Instead I stood next to the conveyor belt as I heard a "Thud. Thud. Thud" of some arse making the noisy and rather pointless gesture of taking his shopping out of his basket and smashing it down on the bit behind the belt that doesn't move.

I looked round and saw a middle aged bloke with grey hair and a paunch. He had a pony-tail and the hard-boiled eyes of the inveterate bore.

I quickly shifted my gaze to my feet, but I was too late.

*“I just happen to like pasta. Ha ha.”*

He did. He had bought three packets of pasta.

*“But what I don’t get is this. These two packets have got exactly the same sort of pasta in them...”*

I looked. He was right. There were two bags of tagliatelli.

*“They both weigh the same, but the fresh one is cheaper than the dried one. But they are exactly the same.”*

I picked up both bags and scrutinised the labels, largely so I didn’t have to make eye contact again.

I mumbled something about the ingredients being slightly different.

*“Do you know,” asked boiled-eye bore, “what it reminds me of?”*

Have you yet perfected the trick of screwing your eyes closed without shutting them? I have.

*“Woolworths,”* he said definitively.

Oh good.

*“You know how they used to have those pick and mix sweet counters?”*

No shit.

*“Well, I was in there and, instead of filling a bag, I had to fill a plastic tray. But do you know what?”*

Go on. Shoot me. Please. I want you to. Now. Anything is preferable to hearing the end of this.

*“They tried to make me pay for the weight of the tray.”*

No. No.

*“They wouldn’t let me weigh the sweets in a bag. It’s a total con. I reckon that because everyone steals their sweets, they make the honest people pay extra.”*

Please scrape me off the floor.

*“But the Trading Standards people said it had to stop, so now.....”*

As I left, he was telling the woman on the checkout about how Morrison’s prices were cheaper in Durham. He’d been there recently and....

## **Ai you!**

Walking down my street this morning with baby and shopping. Gentle drizzle, pushchair wheels sticking. Jerked from my daydreams by a series of thuds and bangs and shouts.

I stop and I look up. There’s a short woman inside her house hammering at the window pane, almost trying to scale it.

It's one of those long, fixed panes with a small hinged window at the top. Surely she can't be trying to climb out of it?

*"Ai! Ai! Ai! Yass. You! Stop! Stop! Ai! Ai!"*

I stare completely blankly. Are my trousers on fire or something? I check. No, can't be that.

*"Ai! Yass. There a man next door. Who is? Itsa man. He next door."*

I look at the house next door. Sure enough, there's a man standing in the sheltered doorway. I know who he is. He looks at me with an expression of contemptuous resignation, clearly willing me to pass it on to the excited woman. I do.

*"You live here, don't you?"* I say.

*"Yes."*

*"He lives there,"* I say to the woman.

*"There a man, there a man. He been knock at door."*

*“Yes, he lives there,”* I reiterate, beginning to get bored of the situation.

*“Who is the man? There a man! There a man!”*

*“I think she wants to know who you are,”* I tell the man.

He gives me another one of those looks. I pass it on.

*“I think she wants you to show yourself,”* I add helpfully as he begins to step out of his doorway.

The two of them lock eyes and there’s no sign the woman is going to calm down. So I shove the pushchair forward and disappear, leaving them to it.

## **Strike a light**

What is it about me that attracts these people? In the same way that sprinkling aniseed on your trousers makes one irresistible to dogs, I clearly emit some sort of scent that has eccentrics queuing up for a good sniff.

This afternoon I was walking along Manor Road with the baby. We had just been to Stoke Newington's Clissold Park, it was drizzling and I was daydreaming about something so nerdy that I refuse to confess to it in public. As we got near to the bottom of Bethune Road, my dreams were intruded on by a voice that was very close at hand.

*"Help me. Help me."*

I looked up and saw an Orthodox Jewish man. He was wearing the usual garb, had a grey beard and dull brown eyes, with a light and cloudy ring round each iris.

*"Help me,"* he repeated, thrusting a soggy exercise book and a biro into my hands. I looked at it. It was covered with numbers, written in a loose, slightly ill-formed hand.\*

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\* I have been a handwriting snob ever since I won the penmanship prize at my Catholic primary school at the age of 10. I used the book tokens I won to buy a Sven Hassel novel about World War II, in which I read my first ever accounts of fellatio and penile dismemberment (actually, both were in the same scene).

As I was reading, I realised that my new friend was reciting lists of numbers to me. I switched my glance in his direction and saw that he was peering at the electrical components inside a concrete lamp-post. The safety plate was missing, exposing all sorts of wires, resistors and mysterious metal boxes. The latter were covered in digits, and it was these that interested my chum.

*“One Eight Oh. One Eight Four. One Eight Six.”*

*“You want me to write these down?”*

*“Yes. Write.”* And pointing to the exercise book: *“Here”*.

Well, why not? It's only wet. I only happen to be in charge of a baby beginning who is beginning to whinge. I only have some beers under the pushchair that are beginning to lose their chill. Let's write down some numbers.

Sadly, I'm not good with numbers, and nor am I much interested in them. So, for me, the next minute sounded something like this:

*"9870989789WhyamIhere89028904Iwonderifhesdangerous8792489048Imgettingreallyquitewet89089023whatdidIdotodeservethis8902390"*

I might have misremembered the numbers, but the rest is pretty accurate.

Our joint endeavour was sadly interrupted when I realised that the page I was writing on had become too wet to hold a mark from the biro.

*"I'm going to have to write on the next page,"* I said.

*"No. NO,"* and pointing at the sodden leaf: *"HERE."*

*"But it's too wet,"* I said, scribbling the biro across it without making a mark. So I turned the page and made a few zigzags of ink.

It must have convinced, because I soon got another barrage of numbers. This put my instinct for politeness in severe conflict with my distaste for half-witted timewasters.

So, at the next brief pause I took a closer look at what my friend was dictating.

*“Six. Three. Ermmm.”*

*“That’s not a number,” I said. “That says ‘GEC’”.*

*“What?”*

*“It says GEC. General Electric Company. They made the component.”*

*“Write this. Write this,”* said my friend.

*“No”*

*“Write this,”* he said, switching to a new set of numbers.

*“Two Three Oh.”*

*“That’s the voltage. That’s 230 volts.”*

*“Write this,”* he replied, switching numbers again.

But the new page was already wet, and I was beginning to get irritated.

*“Why exactly do you want these numbers?”* I asked.

*“Why want?”*

*“Yes, why do you want the numbers?”*

*“Why want?”*

*“Yes, what are they for?”*

*“Better not say,”* said my friend, as he edged slightly away,  
disappointment in his eyes