

issue 3
spring 2012

i'm a pretender

FREE • MADE IN LONDON • NO ADVERTISING! • NO BLOODY 'LIKE' BUTTONS IN SIGHT • IT'S A ZINE, STUPID

CONSUMPTION.

Why hasn't all this technology made us more creative?

**The medium
is not the
message**

Why do pub bores
still obsess over
format wars?

Policing love

Why anti-gay
marriage
campaigners
belong in the
nineteenth century



ALSO INSIDE: CHOOSE YOUR OWN ZOMBIE ADVENTURE • PSEUDO-INTELLECTUAL MINI ESSAYS • SHORT FICTION

Bury me on the internet

My morbid ambition to be
reincarnated as a pixel

Nine formative moments of my youth

The adolescent experiences which, for better or
worse, made me who I am. Also Pokémon cards.

Choose your own zombie adventure

Zoe came running back down the tracks, her tennis shoes slapping hard on the concrete floor. You stand up with the others, suddenly alert. The small campfire in the middle of the platform is still burning away, faintly, but her torch is already brighter as she reaches the station proper.

“They’re coming!” she pants, doubling over with exertion. Her shoulders heave for a moment as she catches her breath. Marcus runs over.

“How many?” he asks her sharply. She shakes her head.

“Dozens,” she says, pausing for a hacking cough. “Maybe fifty.”

“Fuck. FUCK!” Marcus shouts. The others look uneasy. You notice your knees knocking together of their own accord. You could swear you could hear their approach down the tunnel in front of you.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s switch to the defensive arrangement,” says Andrew. He’s bigger than Marcus and a former military cadet, so you defer to him in situations like this. Everyone begins moving toward their designated areas. You’ve trained for this.

Zoe is still recovering. She must have ran for miles. She was supposed to be trying

to get above ground, you remember. The next station along had a set of stairs instead of an escalator, and there was a chance they might not have been boarded up. Apart from Marcus, none of you had been outside

nel entrances in the event of discovery.

Martha walks over to help and between the two of you you drag the surprisingly heavy doors to the tunnel entrance Zoe just exited. There are no sounds from



in almost a month. There were food supplies, but they weren’t great, and the morale was low. You couldn’t remember what a lungful of clean air tasted like.

“Move! Let’s move!” Andrew shouts. You snap upright and start walking quickly to the edge of the platform. Just inside the tracks there’s a set of old Tube train doors that someone scavenged. The plan was to block up the tun-

nel darkness inside but you know from bitter experience how they can creep up almost soundlessly. You shudder briefly and begin wedging the doors in place, struggling with the uppermost ones. Martha runs back to fetch a few more.

Within a few minutes all of the group are finished, standing around nervously, sweating. It’s warm down here but you never quite feel

hot, just clammy. Marcus is streaming with sweat. Zoe looks pale. Frank and Judy are both sitting down, huddling together on the platform edge. You realise your t-shirt is damp.

“Remember”, Marcus is saying, “stay back and keep quiet. If they can’t get past the doors, they might give up and turn back”.

You all know he’s bullshitting. They never give up. They just keep pushing forwards, relentlessly. The only reason any of you have survived this long is because you were lucky enough to get trapped down here when the outbreak began. Janet’s shopping trip turned out to be the most fortuitous action she’d ever taken. The supermarket bags had lasted them three weeks so far, although most of the fresh stuff had turned a week ago or more.

The silence is broken by an unmistakable noise. Footsteps, shuffling, in the distance of the tunnel. Even with the doors wedged in place, the sound is recognisable. Over the top of the military-esque marching, you think you can make out the odd moan or grunt. Dozens, Zoe had said. It sounded like hundreds from here.

Andrew gripped the tennis racquet mercilessly. Weapons were sparse down here and everyone was left to improvise. You remember that you’ve left your own bludgeon – a length of steel pipe – down by the tracks. You pad quickly over to the edge of the platform and pick it up.

As you pull the pipe back over the platform edge, it suddenly slips out of your sweaty palm. It drops back down to the track level and the noise of the steel ringing against the tracks makes a jarringly loud complaint. You wince and step backwards, almost ducking to hide from the sound.

“Fuuuuuuck,” moans Marcus softly. The sound of the approaching horde has definitely increased and the individual moans and groans are louder and more frequent. “You fucking idiot”, he says to you, with venom. You look down, ashamed.

Almost seconds later, the first of the horde have reached the doors. The first few zombies bang testingly on the doors, their muffled thumps weak and futile. Quickly they’re joined by more, and the noise is louder and more urgent this time. Alarming, the doors begin to move slightly from their positions – for a terrifying second you catch a glimpse through the door’s window of a dozen or more rotting corpses, their decaying flesh pressed against the plastic as they surge forwards, ceaselessly. You step back again, afraid.

“It’ll hold... it’s got to hold,” murmurs Martha alongside you. For the first time you realise just how much responsibility was placed on the two of you in positioning this barricade, and you feel anger – down by the tracks. You pad quickly over to the edge of your group’s survival solely

on the two of you.

Even as your thoughts turn to mutiny, it’s too late. The topmost door bursts from its wedged-in position and the noise of the advancing horde fills the tube station. It’s horrifyingly loud. The dim lighting and echoing chamber make the details even more hopeless. Andrew’s repeated shouts of “Fuck! Stay together! We can still keep them out!” are drowned out by the sounds of a predator that smells its prey.

Then all at once, several things happen: the remaining wall of doors collapses under the weight of the outstretched arms of the horde. The lights flicker and go out. Someone next to you screams and is quickly silenced, and you hear the unmistakable groans of more of the walking dead, but this time coming from directly behind you, near the exit to the escalators.

NOW, OVER TO YOU: WHAT DO YOU DO?



- Do you turn and run for the escalators, hoping against hope that the exits have been unblocked? **Turn to page 6.**
- Do you stand firm, trusting in the other lines of defence established by Andrew and the group? **Turn to page 11.**
- Do you decide to chance the darkness of the other tunnel, and turn and run the other way down the tracks into the unknown? **Turn to page 20.**

Working for the clampdown

You grow up and you calm down, Joe Strummer said. Why do I almost want to?

I'm twenty five years old. I live in a small, rented, one bedroom attic flat in south London with my girlfriend of four years. Most of my friends are in steady relationships of some kind, and a few are engaged or married. One or two have kids. A few even own their own houses. I have no savings, inheritance, trust funds, or anything like that. I'd like to think of myself as liberal and not a traditionalist. My name is Matt.

Sometimes I wonder about what on earth I'm doing here. There's a middle class, suburban part of me that thinks it would be nice to save some money for a deposit to buy a house, then I'd be able to decorate it, put up shelves, throw out old furniture and do it up. Another, more rebellious part of me, thinks this is the worst idea in the world.

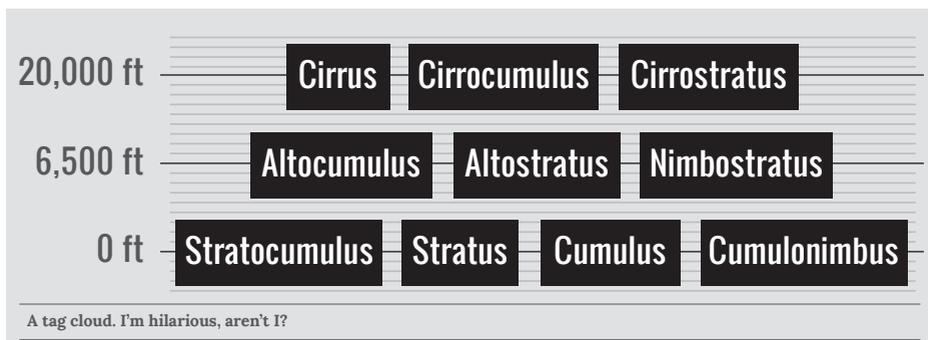
I like the idea of a project. I enjoy coming home from work and making things and the idea of doing this with my hands as opposed to a laptop appeals even more, due to my technoguilt that makes me paranoid that I have no physical skills beyond typing on keyboards. I could quite easily see myself engaging with blueprints and diagrams, colour schemes and varnishes. But fuck that noise.

We buy homes and we 'do them up' and then we live in them. We buy expensive Ikea bookcases to display all the things we've read then sit on our three-piece suites looking at them uncertainly. We take a week out of our lives to wallpaper the living room, for what? So we can sit in it and admire the pattern? Is this really all there is?

This is where my rebel-

lious side falls down. Pursuing this argument to its logical conclusion means I'd have to follow the anarchist dictum and throw away all of my property, which is all, of course, theft. I'd give away all my books and survive with my portable Kindle. No more hoarding of unlistened-to CDs, but just one iPod. No hours of painstaking decoration, but a life filled with experiences and discovery. I'm not quite sure I'm ready for this either.

Marriage is another conflict for me. I love my partner and the idea of spending the rest of our lives together sounds pretty amiable to me. At the same time though I can't get behind the idea of investing thousands of pounds on the enforced happiness of a single day. Sure, this is hardly original criti-



A tag cloud. I'm hilarious, aren't I?



I want a suburban home. Right?

cism: nobody says you have to get married, and it's possible to do it on a budget. I think what ultimately causes me to struggle with it is the implications: once you're married, the inevitable next step is children. While I'd quite like to be a dad one day, thinking about it now makes me feel scared as though my own life is close to over. Settling down to marry and have kids is, to me, an admission that your own life has reached its apex (at least in terms of youth) and you're ready to pass things on to the next generation. I'm not sure what the act

of me marrying is proving, or to whom. If it's love, between two people, do you need to make it 'official'? Don't you just know? I don't want to go through all of that just to convince everybody else.

Just thinking this stuff makes me feel guilty all over again. I'm advocating a life of "experiences and discovery" as I sit at home on weekends staring into screens. If I was really advocating throwing away hoarded possessions and not bothering to while away your free time making your house a home, why aren't I doing it?

If I won the lottery and was able to buy a fantastic house for us to live in, I'd probably do it. Then I'd get excited about all the things I could buy for it: I'd build a music studio, a games room, an audio system piping music through the whole house, a giant aquarium. Then I'd devote my life to making these things a reality. But then what? I don't know if, ultimately, these things would actually make me happy. The pursuit of goals is often more enjoyable than their achievement, and sometimes you're reminded in that bittersweet way that the end result wasn't quite as good as you were hoping.

Is it pointless to fight it? I am middle class, I am a "young professional", I am a white, university-educated male. All the boxes are ticked. I just live with the worry that in a year or two's time I'll find myself putting up a set of bleached oak shelves, and wondering what else I was supposed to do. ■



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ZOMBIE ADVENTURE: #1

You plunge breathlessly into the darkness, hoping against hope that you can slip by unnoticed in the chaos. Around you are screams and the noise of combat, almost drowned out by groans and shuffling feet.

Seconds after making your move, you encounter the distinctive stench of rotting flesh. Up ahead of you must be one of the undead,

judging by the putrid air and noxious smell. You gag and try to dodge left. Unexpectedly, your foot catches in something – possibly a missing paving slab or brick. You slip and go down, your ankle twisting agonisingly.

The zombie is on you before you can catch a breath, its cold hands gripping you wetly. You struggle free but another is quickly there on your other side, its rat-

ting breath dripping onto your face. You scream, but it's altogether too late. Sobbing, you feel the press of the horde as they rip you apart, convulsing in an orgy of warm flesh and blood. Seconds from the end, you feel the pain swell and then depart, your senses failing. As the dead devour your rapidly-disappearing body, you hear the sounds of the rest of your group suffering similar fates. You never had a chance. ■

Policing love

Anti-gay marriage campaign nonsense

Coalition for Marriage

HOME ABOUT US SIGNATORIES NEWS BLOG RESOURCES DONATE

DON'T PLAY POLITICS
ONE MAN + ONE WOMAN
WITH MARRIAGE

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453,828 PEOPLE HAVE SIGNED THE PETITION SO FAR

3568 14.8K

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Screenshot of the Coalition For Marriage site (www.c4m.org.uk)

I recently had the misfortune to come across a website campaigning against the right for gay people in the UK to get married. It was called the Coalition For Marriage / C4M (www.c4m.org.uk) and as of the time of writing, has over 450,000 signatories to its petition which calls for the government to keep marriage “one man + one woman”. It claims to be an umbrella organisation which “reaches out to people of all faiths” – except gay people of faith, obviously.

It’s a faintly embarrassing stab at justifying the argument against gay marriage. There are four topic headings: “Marriage is unique”, “No need to redefine”, “Profound consequences” and “Speak up”. Each one of them has a paragraph of poorly-argued

rhetoric against the right of gay people to be joined in marriage.

The first point, “Marriage is unique”, argues that “marriage reflects the complementary natures of men and women”, and points to the long history of marriage always being “the union of a man and a woman”. Of course, in olden times, there were no gay people, as the histories of ancient Greece and Rome accurately reflect. Similarly, only the combination of female/male individuals results in a complementary experience – no two men or women have ever fitted well together as a couple. These facts are undisputed... right?

“No need to redefine” is perhaps the most unwittingly hypocritical of the claims, as it explains patronisingly that

“civil partnerships already provide all the legal benefits of marriage”. Those shrewd gays! Of course the only reason they’d want to marry is for the tax breaks! They’re probably not even gay! Just couldn’t get a woman to fancy them. There’s clearly no cases where two people of the same sex just plain ol’ love each other, and want to have an all-singing, all-dancing wedding celebration instead of a stuffy legal procedure. No.

This point is expanded by the plainly false “it’s not discriminatory to support traditional marriage”. Sorry – yes it is. In what conceivable way is restricting a ceremony celebrating two individuals’ love for one another to people of a specific sexual orientation not discriminatory? But wait, there’s more: “no one has the

right to redefine marriage for the rest of us". Oh... except you, apparently. The government of the country actually do have that right, just as they control every other legal proceeding in the country. While marriage may be rooted in religious and spiritual tradition, the only part of it that is legally enforceable is the part where the papers are signed

records and hotpants. Scaremongering aside, it's hard to imagine how they could put this astonishing act of doublethink – surely those in favour of gay marriage are already being sidelined? But no: keen to outdo itself, they follow this with "couples seeking to adopt or foster could be excluded". While this makes the wrong assumption that gay

it being redefined to allow polygamy?". Yes! Or what if they redefine it to allow marrying animals? Or inanimate objects?! What if they force us all to marry squids in the sea and raise their deformed, mutated, chimeric squidding children, squirting ink in our faces as we try to teach them to hate gays?!?! I ask you.

Last of all they acknowl-

	<h3>MARRIAGE IS UNIQUE</h3>		<h3>NO NEED TO REDEFINE</h3>
	<h3>PROFOUND CONSEQUENCES</h3>		<h3>SPEAK UP</h3>
	<p>Throughout history and in virtually all human societies marriage has always been the union of a man and a woman. Marriage reflects the complementary natures of men and women. Although death and divorce may prevent it, the evidence shows that children do best with a married mother and a father.</p>		<p>Civil partnerships already provide all the legal benefits of marriage so there's no need to redefine marriage. It's not discriminatory to support traditional marriage. Same-sex couples may choose to have a civil partnership but no one has the right to redefine marriage for the rest of us.</p>
	<p>If marriage is redefined, those who believe in traditional marriage will be sidelined. People's careers could be harmed, couples seeking to adopt or foster could be excluded, and schools would inevitably have to teach the new definition to children. If marriage is redefined once, what is to stop it being redefined to allow polygamy?</p>		<p>People should not feel pressurised to go along with same-sex marriage just because of political correctness. They should be free to express their views. A public consultation on the proposals to redefine marriage has been launched. Although the Government says it is determined to press ahead regardless, the consultation provides an opportunity for members of the public to say they do not agree with redefining marriage.</p>

The main campaign text for the C4M website

at the end. The rest is fluff.

Point 3, "profound consequences", is, I think, a joke. "If marriage is redefined, those who believe in traditional marriage will be sidelined". Of course they will - poor old victimised straight people will be kicked out of their churches and prayer groups as hordes of rampant gays descend upon their places of worship with Will Young

couples can't currently adopt (they can), it stumbles on its own hypocrisy once more: even if they couldn't adopt, surely that would mean gay couples are already excluded? So... it's not discriminatory, but it's okay if gays are excluded from marrying and adopting. Best of all, this point ends with the hysterical addendum of "if marriage is redefined once, what is to stop

edge the controversy of what they're preaching and add: "people should not feel pressurised to go along with same-sex marriage just because of political correctness. They should be free to express their views". Except, of course, if those views include pro-gay marriage ones, which, we should remember, "would inevitably have to [be taught] to children". Invok-

ing the “political correctness gone mad” card is a smooth move by the C4M team – Daily Mail readers and sheepish Home Counties bigots will love this Jeremy Clarkson-esque call to arms. Yes, ban the gays! They bloody love political correctness!

The existence of this entire site (and its subsequent almost half a million signa-

Tradition for tradition's sake is pointless: something is passed down from generation to generation because it has some inherent value and meaning for that generation. If it stops being useful in the current age it becomes an heirloom, a relic of the past, like your granddad's old pocketwatch or a homophobic from Gloucestershire.

Part of me wants to put up a rival website called 'Coalition for White People' which replaces all references to gay people and same-sex couples with ones to black people instead. It could campaign to remove black people from British society, since “throughout history Britain has always been the nation of white people. If black people



The C4M logo looks so innocuous: who could hate a family-loving company? Oh, anyone who's a fan of sexual equality.

tories) has boggled my mind. I can't believe there are that many people who genuinely think that allowing gay couples to formally express their love and devotion to one another will DESTROY THE VERY FABRIC OF SOCIETY FOR ALL TIME. It's homophobia gone mad! Do they genuinely believe nonsense like “people's careers could be harmed”? Whose careers? The people who make websites advocating no to gay marriage?! I can't think of a scenario where allowing gay couples to marry will genuinely impact on any straight person's life. The ‘worst’ it could lead to is a wider definition of a concept that's existed for thousands of years and has evolved countless times through that period.

“What if they force us all to marry squids in the sea and raise their squidling children, squirting ink in our faces as we teach them to hate gays?”

If we refuse to allow definitions to change and adapt as society does, then the things they define ultimately die and become memories rather than living, breathing things. I can't understand why anybody would want to do this to something they so obviously believe in.

are allowed in, those who believe in traditional whites-only society will be sidelined”. Remember: “it's not discriminatory to support traditional whites-only society”. Then I remember that the actual C4M website is already beyond parody.

We live in a world with effectively unlimited resources for communicating like this – creating campaigns, petitions, sharing views and dialogues. Please, C4M and your supporters: don't waste these resources, not to mention your lives, preaching discrimination and prevention to other people just trying to live theirs. Go home, love your partner if you have one, and stop trying to tell other people how the fuck they should love theirs. ■

Capital

London will ignore you like a jilted lover, refusing to welcome you as you arrive and steadfastly absorbing you into its flow, with faces streaming past unnoticed and uncaring. It will challenge you to defy it and throw its best and worst at you at once, staring you down. Walk from the train station and be harangued by a tramp, drunk at 5pm on a Sunday evening, the sun fat and bronzed. Step down a sidestreet and spot stone-

work chiselled centuries ago. Dodge around a pool of congealing vomit.

Its every street storied and documented, and its every literary pseud clamouring to capture its essence in mere words. It's the city that inspired poets to dream in clouds of opium and the city whose children burned it with fire just nine months ago. Walk down the street alongside the other river, the traffic. Ebbing and flowing but never dissipating,

there are a million people eager to be gone, or to be here exactly now. Faces press warm on windows as landmarks rise and fall through handprint-marked glass. Wearing heads bow in deference, defeated, down limestone pavements. Somewhere in the crowd a person passes you who has done something unspeakable, somewhere.

You are its unrequited love. It doesn't need you; had already forgotten you.



Like a pebble in a river it flowed around you for a while, then you left, were plucked away, and the flow resumed, filling the space you occupied without a second spared for ceremony. You sink to the bottom under the weight of its constant press: people, money, sound, movement, and always ambition. Its streets and subways pulse with purpose. Men in suits whose feet tread proudly, strutting. Youth in Nike kicks, swag-

gering. Tourists strapped with backpacks, striking out, wrongly. A bike blurs past, all breaths and hi-vis, gone. Police sirens everywhere, planes competing above.

You're a worker in a hive but the hive needs no honey. You're a slave to an oar but the ship's not at sea. You're a pin on a processor, but there's nothing to compute. This city has already seen it, already heard it before, and it has borne all its crowns and scars fiercely. You're

nothing, nobody, anonymous and unloved.

You can't get enough of it. Each lungful of polluted air feels like your first breath. Every passing snatch of conversation and shouted mysticism fills you with life. All its people, furtive and driven, bring colour and character to its disdainful permanence. Like a wave against a cliff face you smash yourself, joyfully, ceaselessly, at its impassive bulk. And you love it. ■



London skyline photo by darrendean (www.sxc.hu/profile/darrendean)

The medium is not the message

I used to be a pub bore. In fact, I probably still am. Ask any of my friends. But I certainly used to be the sort of person who'd ponce on about the 'warmth' of vinyl; the 'purity' of analogue photography; the 'tangibility' of print. All of this unasked-for nerdgasmung was undoubtedly at the expense of such vagaries as, well, friends, fun, and having a life. There are plenty of arguments for using 'old' formats like vinyl,

analogue and print. Some of them are even good. But this is besides the point, because the point is that the medium is not the message.

Take music. You've heard all the clichés about vinyl sounding 'warmer' and seen every music buff proudly show off their dog-eared line of sleeves. But why do they do this? Is it because they genuinely love music more than you, with your tinny-sounding iPod and

laughably-lossy MP3s? Or is it because they've somehow fallen into a black hole where the packaging and plastic that contains your favourite album is somehow more significant than the songs and lyrics themselves?

It's the same with film. Comment threads around online with 35mm purists decrying the world of digital cinema, all the while ignoring the inconvenient facts that funding just doesn't exist for



indie filmmakers to pay for 35mm camera film anymore. Do people really want others to sacrifice their creativity just because the format isn't 'right'?

And print. Don't get me started on print. Mainly because it raises uncomfortable questions about why this very zine is on paper and not online. But I digress. Newspaper readers and journalists online treat digital news with a suspicion bordering on outright fear. People cling to the image of their breakfast cornflakes bunched up alongside a folded morning newspaper, even if that scene doesn't reflect anybody's actual life any more. And even if it does, it continues to miss the point: nobody's advocating change merely for the sake of change.

As with other industries, the cost of entry is so high for what I'm creatively terming "physical products" that independent and first-time creators are effectively priced out of the market.

Even established newspapers and publishers are switching to digital production methods in order to keep their content being published. As a consumer of that content, why would you set so much store in one single form of its presentation? Why is it so hard to imagine reading the news in a different format? A broadsheet newspaper is one of the most unwieldy items to comfortably digest and yet there are people today who defend them to the hilt, steadfastly refusing to consider anything other than that which they're used to.

It keeps me up at night (because I'm a mildly pathetic pseudointellectual) that there are people who would rather expend energy on debating the merits of decades-old formats than actually producing those things. While film nerds are arguing over whether 35mm produces better movies than digital "tape", other people are busy actually making films.

The medium is not the

message. Why are we so tied to one format of anything? This isn't to say that we should immediately jump on every new piece of technology that appears, disregarding all our old tech in the process. It's simply that socially, a certain subset of people seem keen on debating endless turf wars, as though we learned nothing from BetaMax vs VHS. People moan about backwards compatibility but they forget that there are nerds up and down the country whose sole passion in life is making Amiga games from 1983 run on their Macbook Pro. These people accuse others of cynicism, suggesting cinemas are moving to digital to skimp on costs, once again missing the point that a saving on camera film benefits its producers as well. They're the same people who buy gold-plated hifi cables to improve their sound quality, then use it to listen to Dire Straits LPs. The medium is not the message. The content is. ■

CHOOSE YOUR OWN ZOMBIE ADVENTURE: #2

You plunge breathlessly into the darkness, hoping against hope that you can slip by unnoticed in the chaos. Around you are screams and the noise of combat, almost drowned out by groans and shuffling feet.

Seconds after making your move, you encounter the distinctive stench of rotting flesh. Up ahead of you must be one of the undead,

judging by the putrid air and noxious smell. You gag and try to dodge left. Unexpectedly, your foot catches in something – possibly a missing paving slab or brick. You slip and go down, your ankle twisting agonisingly.

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tling breath dripping onto your face. You scream, but it's altogether too late. Sobbing, you feel the press of the horde as they rip you apart, convulsing in an orgy of warm flesh and blood. Seconds from the end, you feel the pain swell and then depart, your senses failing. As the dead devour your rapidly-disappearing body, you hear the sounds of the rest of your group suffering similar fates. You never had a chance. ■



The Pier House Hotel

“Let me know when you’re all unpacked and comfortable and I’ll give you the grand tour!” the middle-aged proprietor told me gaily, pressing a set of clean folded towels into my arms and waddling out of the door. I smiled and closed it after her, then dropped the towels unceremoniously on the bed.

I looked around the room. It was like stepping back in time. Originally a Victorian boarding house, the Pier House Hotel was now clearly aiming at the retiree market, with camomile soap in the en suite and a kind of lacy frill decorating every flat surface. Mrs. Whitburn, the landlady, was keen to welcome me, perhaps her first customer aged under sixty, to the premises. “So lovely to have you here,” she’d greeted me, asking if I was planning to go out and “see the sights”. I assured her I was mainly here on business and planned to work for most of my stay. “I see”, she said, crestfallen. “Do let me know if you change your mind!”. I hadn’t.

I could see the eponymous pier from my window, still laden with holidaymakers despite the mild drizzle. Plonk a few fruit machines and a rickety rollercoaster somewhere and Britons will queue up in any conditions, I thought wryly. I tucked the lace curtains back in place and decided to go and take



Mrs. Whitburn up on her offer of a tour.

I’d politely smiled my way through two separate rooms of decorative crockery before beginning to regret the decision. The woman was a keen talker and apparently unable to detect when her subjects were struggling to pretend to stay awake, much

less listen. She was in the middle of an anecdote concerning a local florist’s difficulties sourcing tulips when there was the sound of the front door banging shut.

“Ooh, that’ll be the Major”, she said in a stage whisper, turning around with un concealed excitement. “We call him that for fun”, she added,

in a genuine whisper this time. "The old dear's gone a bit loopy, bless him!"

Before long an older gentleman tumbled into the hallway, a wide-brimmed hat in his hands. He wore a heavy raincoat and had a surprising mop of thick white hair, with a pair of spectacles nestled on top. He looked up quickly as we saw him, his eyes resting on me first as he sized me up, before switching to Mrs. Whitburn.

"Maureen," he acknowledged gruffly, bowing his head slightly as he shuffled to a halt. "Lovely day for it," he gestured back towards the door with the hat.

"Oh yes," Mrs. Whitburn offered vaguely. "Claude, I'd like you to meet our new guest, Mr. Hill".

"Thomas", I said, offering my hand to the old man. He grasped it firmly, his hand cold. Veins stuck out along his wrist.

"Claude Dupont. Sounds French because it is," he said, with no hint of a continental accent.

"The Major served in the Foreign Legion!", Mrs. Whitburn informed me, eyes bulging. "Didn't you, Claude!"

The old man nodded softly, casting his eyes down to the polished floorboards as he did so. "Did twenty four years. Honourably discharged in the end, war wound" he added, gesturing once more with the hat towards his left leg. I nodded and tried to look respectful.

"You'll have to tell Tom all about it, Major! He's writing a book - he's an author!"

Mrs. Whitburn told him, now turning those extended eyeballs to the old man.

"Writer, eh? Used to know a few chaps like you. What are you writing about? Brighton?" he asked, as though this town was an obvious subject for a book.

"Not quite - it's a biography. I'm writing about a Frenchman, actually, a poet. Charles Baudelaire?"

"Oh, Baudelaire. I know the man. Knew him, I should say."

"You... you knew Baudelaire? His work, you must mean."

"Always getting drunk and starting fights, he was. Bit of a womaniser," he said, aiming this last at Mrs. Whitburn with relish. She had the courtesy to blush.

I smiled gamely, remembering the landlady's warning. "I see. Not a drinker yourself, then?" I asked.

He looked indignant. "I've not touched a drop of the stuff since the war. Rots your insides. Dulls the mind. Kills the libido!" he finished. This was too much for Mrs. Whitburn.

"A n y w a y, Claude," she fussed. "I've got to finish giving Mr. Hill the tour. I'm sure you two can catch up later!" she hinted, taking my arm firmly and leading

me back down the hallway. "Goodbye Major!"

"Goodbye," he sniffed, watching us curiously.

She waited until we heard him clump slowly upstairs before she turned to me with a smile. "He's lovable, really. He'll claim to have known everyone and been everywhere. Don't worry though, he's harmless. A very loyal customer, too," she added firmly. I nodded again.

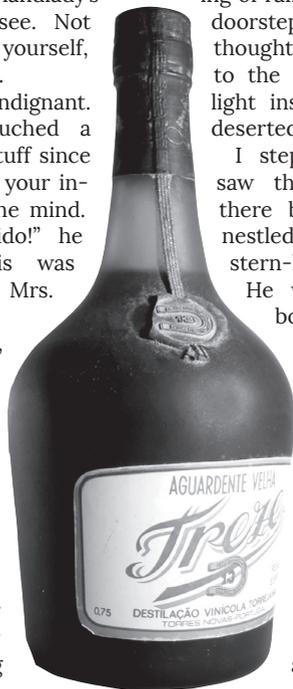
§

A few evenings later I decided to give up on the novel for the evening, the day's work being something of a lost cause. I had half a mind to venture outside for dinner but when I reached the door and heard the pattering of rain insistent on the doorstep, I had second thoughts. Turning to go to the kitchen, I saw a light inside the usually-deserted common room.

I stepped inside and saw the Major seated there by the fireplace, nestled in a large but stern-looking armchair.

He was clutching a book intently as though it could break free of his grip at any minute. I couldn't make out the name.

"Hill," he said brusquely as I entered. "Make yourself at home," he said, indicating the array of lesser



chairs surrounding him. I selected one and sat, enjoying the warmth for a moment.

"How's the novel?" he asked after a time.

"Not bad. A little slow progress today, unfortunately," I said mildly. He said nothing, continuing his own book. After a few minutes I returned the small talk. "What are you reading?"

He paused and looked up. "Nelson. The letters", he added, clarifying.

"A hero of yours?" I asked.

"Nelson? The man was a dog. I enjoy his correspondence, though. You can always judge a man by his words, as I imagine you already know in your line of work."

I nodded. He took a sip from what was unmistakably a glass of brandy.

"I thought you weren't a drinker?" I asked, uncertain now.

"Nonsense! Whoever told you that? A glass of this stuff every day keeps you alert and focused", he told me, shaking the glass to illustrate. Words of contradiction began to form in my mind but again I remembered Mrs. Whitburn's words and said nothing.

"There's a letter to me in here," he confided. "I suppose that's why I keep reading them".

"To you - from Nelson?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, just before Trafalgar", he confirmed. "He was asking for my advice on beating the French".

"Did you help him?" I asked, going along with the

charade.

"Of course I bloody didn't!" he said, outraged. "The damn fool had the cheek to come to me, a Frenchman, to ask for help defeating my countrymen? Pah!" he spat. I laughed in spite of myself.

We exchanged a few more pleasantries that evening and I eventually decided to retire for the night after accepting a glass of his pleasantly good brandy. I was in the process of bidding him good night when he gripped the edge of his armchair, suddenly lucid.

"Hill," he said. "You can be trusted, I take it?"

"Me? Certainly, Major. What's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing, nothing. Just..." he paused. "Just that I'm on a secret mission".

"Secret, you say?" I asked, wondering what the old chap could be talking about. "What's this mission?"

"For the war," he said, looking up at the door for a moment. "A bit of surveillance, you know. Reconnoitering. Disrupting things. I have some powerful friends, you know."

"Really? Who are they?"

"Friends. People I can trust. I help them, and they help me. They've got some special tools for me, too. It says so right in these letters," he indicated the book.

I nodded sagely. He took a long sip from his glass, draining it.

"Lots of enemies about," he said with finality.

"I see", I told him, playing along. "Is it anything I could help with?"

"You?" he mused. "Perhaps,

Hill, perhaps. When the time comes you may be of use."

I smiled. "I hope so". I made my goodbyes and headed for bed, laughing silently as I climbed the stairs.

§

I saw nothing of the Major for the next three days. When I awoke for breakfast he wasn't at his customary spot at head of the table, and when I ventured downstairs for tea he was nowhere to be found, not even in his chair in the common room. When I asked Mrs. Whitburn she wasn't surprised. "Claude comes and goes", she told me. "Sometimes I won't see him for a week, then he'll arrive out of the blue, full of stories and characters. He does make me laugh!". I smiled again, wondering.

The next time I did hear from him, it was via a note pushed under my door a full five days after our evening conversation. It was brief and written in a neat and elegant hand. It read "*If you want to help the cause, be on the Pier by 0900 to-morrow. Major*".

Bemused, I decided not to embarrass the old man by showing it to anyone else. I went to bed curious and intrigued that night, setting my alarm early just in case.

§

I woke at 7:30am, unable to sleep further. I dressed and ate a hasty breakfast, wondering if I'd see the Major. He didn't appear so I resolved with disappointment to con-



tinue my work. Trooping back up the stairs, I passed a few other guests and exchanged the usual morning pleasantries.

Forty minutes later I put down my pen, unable to concentrate. It was 8:45am and I couldn't stop thinking about the old man's note. Putting on my shoes, I headed back downstairs and decided a bit of the sea breeze couldn't hurt.

The pier, of course, was a stone's throw from the hotel, so I was there with almost

ten minutes to spare. I shivered slightly in the morning breeze, watching the gulls reel over the waves. I was almost distracted enough to ignore the explosion when it took place, so serene was the ocean scene, but the jolt of the impact was enough to throw me off my feet, along with the morning's other piergoers.

The Pier House Hotel was on fire, with thick black smoke pouring from three of the upstairs windows. The entire front face of the build-

ing was invisible, dust and clouds of ash obscuring it as car alarms began to shriek. A few bricks and pieces of rubble scudded to the ground just in front of me and I thought I heard the sound of people screaming. A police siren rapidly became audible and passers-by ducked their heads and ran from the site of the burning building.

Scrambling up off the rough wooden decking of the pier, I ran for the ruined hotel. A few people were stood outside, seemingly unable to

act. From outside the door the screams were clearly audible and I even thought I could make out Mrs. Whitburn's voice amongst the cries. Pulling off my scarf, I ducked through the smoke clouds and ran inside the hotel.

The scene inside was chaos. Stricken walls leaked plaster and sawdust and the ceiling over the kitchen had completely collapsed. Half of the stairs were torn away and a large rug was burning in the corner of the common room. A shattered chandelier decorated the hallway floor.

I tried the stairs but the second step immediately collapsed under my weight. A voice screamed louder upstairs, more urgently, and I pressed on, quickly treading on boards that were hot underfoot. I reached the top of the stairs just in time to see a blazing rail of curtains collapse onto the floor, sending the shag pile carpet up in acrid flames.

"Mr. Hill!" came a pained shriek and I knew it was Mrs. Whitburn. She screamed my name from the floor of an open room, her face blackened and bloody. I ran over to her and bent to lift her.

"The Major!" she was yelling. "Claude!"

"Where is he?" I yelled back over the creaking of the building's timbers. "I'll come back for him!"

"No!" she cried, but I couldn't make out the rest of her words over the sirens collecting outside. I squatted and hefted her over my shoulder, thighs screaming

too in protest. I began the descent of the destroyed staircase, having to leap and partly run down the steps to stay upright. I deposited Mrs. Whitburn on the grassy bank outside where the paramedics immediately wrapped her in an oxygen mask and foil cover.

I had to go and find the Major, I thought, wondering where he could have been. I ran back inside the house as onlookers shouted "No!" from behind me. I decided to try the common room first.

He was there, in his chair, or at least, what remained of it. I could see from the door that it was already too late for the old man, but I continued to his body anyway. The damage wasn't as bad in here besides the burning rug, but he had clearly died of smoke inhalation.

As I reached his body, he suddenly twitched. An eye flickered open in his smoky face.

"Hill", he croaked.

"Major! Hold on, let me get you—"

"No," he choked. "This is it."

"It's not, there's an ambulance, we can get you outside, we can—"

"No!" he shouted, angry. "This is how it ends. I told you to get out! I told you!"

"Your note?" I asked, confused. It had completely slipped my mind in the chaos.

"You offered to help me with my mission!" he said, spittle frothing around his mouth. "I have completed it!"

I took a step backward, involuntarily. "This... this was

your mission?" I half-shouted. He didn't respond.

Suddenly I looked around me. There on the floor at his feet were several crude fuseboxes, lit up with now-broken LED bulbs. One still had a timer on it, ticking.

"Get out," he murmured, weakening. "Enemies..."

I took one more look at the room and decided not to linger any further. Turning without a backward glance I ran from the room and headed for the main door.

As I reached it, the second bomb blast exploded, coming from the room I'd just left. There was a quickly-silenced yelp and a rumble as the wall collapsed, bricks flying past me and something sharp and hot glancing off my thigh. I ran, hobbling, into the arms of the paramedics.

§

Mrs. Whitburn never made it to the hospital. She was the only resident who got out of the building alive apart from me, but they said the burns were too much for her. She died before her whole business collapsed in front of her, which was a small mercy at least.

No family claimed the dental records which presumably belonged to the Major, and nobody ever traced the explosions back to him.

Sometimes I come back here, to the pier, and wonder about what happened. What if I had taken him seriously? What if I'd told someone?

I never did finish my book about Baudelaire. ■

Face in the tracks

“This station is Waterloo. Change here for the Northern Line”.

The tube, in all its mid-afternoon excitement. The tourists already got off at Leicester Square, except for a few mildly concerned-looking remnants clutching their sightseeing maps and squinting at the station diagram with increasing horror. There are a few grannies clustered at one end of my

should be on the move in a couple of minutes. Apologies for any inconvenience this may cause you”. Silence once more. The teenagers pause, mid-kiss, in case it was something important. The tourists panic harder. I resume the game.

Minutes pass. I crack a few more levels of *Angry Birds* then look up momentarily, wondering why we’re not at the next station yet. A few other people are beginning

man, Cockney. “There appears to have been a problem with this train. TfL are sending some engineers to inspect the problem. This means we may have to remain here for some time while the defect is identified. Once again, I apologise for any delay to your journey”.

The grannies look worried now. A few of them turn to one another trying to clarify what just happened. The teenagers huff melodramati-



carriage and a teenage couple obliviously kissing immediately opposite me. I make a show of grimacing to myself and pull out my phone to distract myself from their outspoken affection. The doors close and we rumble on.

I’ve almost killed the final pig when the intercom interrupts, the driver’s voice crisp but uncertain. “Ladies and gentlemen, I’ve just been advised from the control room that we’re being held between stations while a train ahead of us is checked”, the voice announced. “We

to look up, some with a faint hint of annoyance. Still nothing.

Somewhere in the distance I think I hear a noise. It seems to be coming from the rear of the tunnel, perhaps the sound of the engine switching into gear again. We’re still not moving, though. The lights flicker inside the carriage for the briefest of moments. I’m not sure whether I just blinked for an extra moment.

“Ladies and gentlemen”, crackles the voice again, sounding like a middle-aged

cally and the girl even folds her arms, completing the cliché. I stand up, on impulse, immediately feeling stupid as several heads turn to stare at me. What was I going to do? Get off the train?

I wander over to the large double doors and glance through the plastic window. It’s facing immediately onto the tunnel wall, which has some presumably-official graffiti markings indicating pipelines or electricity circuits. For a moment I start idly wondering how long it takes for the oxygen to run



out in a tube carriage before realising this is one of those urban legends like the stories of subterranean mosquito species evolving in the warm and dry conditions of the Underground, feeding on fat tourists and sweating commuters.

There's a light in the wall on the opposite door to this one. I walk over to it and realise it's not actually on the wall near the door. There's a small gap in the tunnel surface where the door has

stopped and a few metres through the gap is a small jewel-shaped light, orange and crass. Trying not to look directly at the light I look around it to try to make out the wall of the room behind the gap. It's hard to see what's going on but there seems to be a door, or perhaps a cupboard, just to the right of the light. Probably a workman's room or something.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the driver begins, becoming quite adept at addressing

us. "I've just been advised by the control room that we're to evacuate this train while engineers move it to another location. Please remain seated and calm while emergency services come through the train. When they reach your carriage they will escort you to the nearest exits. Please follow them and do as they say - there's no need to panic".

At this a few of the old ladies gasp aloud in horror. One clutches a walking stick and moans softly and another pats her shoulder gently. Almost as soon as the announcement is over I see the hi-vis jacket of an official opening the door you're not supposed to open at the back of our carriage, and stepping inside.

"Hi there folks," the official says. "Please can you make your way out by following me to the next carriage and exiting the train there". He indicates through the adjacent door and opens it, stepping over the threshold of the carriage and repeating the message to the passengers there. My carriage timidly (and slowly) follows him.

Inside the next carriage the officer presses a key into the wall of the train and all of the doors hiss open. People step outside nervously and follow other fluorescently-garbed security people up what looks to be some maintenance stairs. I'm right at the back behind the shuffling grannies.

I notice that the door facing the gap in the wall has also hissed open in the pre-

vious carriage. The adjoining door is still open and I edge back and look through it, wondering. It's the work of a moment to gently step back into the old carriage and pad over to the double doors once more. The gap is much bigger up close and I realise it's probably where an old door used to stand. I press my face against it and breathe a deep breath of the musty tasting air. Inside the room I can see much more clearly: there's an old-looking desk just in front of the orange lamp, and there looks to be a newspaper on there, or possibly a food wrapper. There's a chair, pushed back from the table edge, and what could be a shelf to the right of the lamp. There's something perched on the shelf but as I lean in to look, somewhere behind me I hear voices as the security officers attempt to round up the stragglers. I turn around to catch up.

As I turn my back on the gap and the jewel-shaped light I feel a sudden cool gust of air hit the back of my neck. I whirl around just in time to see the orange light wink, as though the power had gone out temporarily, or somebody had briskly walked past it for a moment. I shiver involuntarily for a moment at the cool air and jump back across the gap to the next carriage, following where the others had gone up the maintenance stairs.

The stairs are dark and there's no light or voices anymore. I walk up the first few steps, my eyes slowly

adjusting to the gloom. The steps gradually come properly into view and they're quite tall - this station must be quite deep underground. The stairs round a corner and before I take it I look back at the stranded train behind me.

The empty train with its doors open and lights on instills a momentary instinct - born of years of commuting - to run to the doors and jump in before they beep shut. Smiling in spite of myself, I turn to take the stairs



once more. Even as I turn, the doors beep and close shut. The train seems to click for a second, then it departs, backwards, haltingly. The engineers, I imagine, watching it reverse the way it had come. As its lights leave the tunnel I quickly become blind for a moment, blinking in the grey light.

With a horrible jolt, my vision fades back in just in time for me to make out the unmistakable shape of a face, down below me on the tracks. It's white and grinning and staring directly at

me. It's in the middle of the tracks where the train was standing, at a low height suggesting the owner was crouching or even lying in the tracks. My heart pounding, I turned and ran up the stairs, hoping with an urgent fear that the officials would still be near.

After a few minutes of crashing up stone stairs I catch sight of the main group and squeeze my way past the slower of the grannies, no doubt giving them a good fright in turn as I speed past

them, keen not to be at the back of the group. Now I'm back amongst the group I feel a sudden sense of concern for the person I'd seen on the tracks.

"Excuse me!" I shout, hailing the tall man at the head of the group with the torch and hi-vis jacket. "I think there's someone still down there".

He turns to examine me, shining the torch directly into my eyes so I'm blinded again. I raise a hand, flinching.

"What did you say?" he asks, walking towards me.

"I thought I saw someone, down on the tracks just now".

"Everyone's here," he tells me, gesturing with the torch. "They've checked on the cameras. All accounted for."

"I saw someone", I insist, the memory now very clear of that pale-skinned face with eyes locked onto me. "Just now".

He looks at me uncertainly for a moment, then shakes his head. "I'll tell them to have another look on the scanners", he eventually resolves. "Don't panic, though, this is all very safe stuff. Very well organised these days". He turns back to lead the group, launching into a story to the admiring pensioners about how in his day the whole Underground ran on candles and sausage rolls or something.

I carry on walking and eventually we reach a well-locked security door. The man unlocks it and we step outside, unexpectedly, into daylight. There are some more officials waiting for us

and some of them are handing out forms so we can reclaim our fares. I push out of the throng and wander vaguely away, breathing quickly.

§

Six days later and I'm on the same line again, back from visiting family. I feel a vague sense of trepidation boarding the train, then smile at myself once more as I realise it's hardly Vietnam. We pass through Waterloo without delay and the train is busy, more tourists apparently keen to discover the delights of Elephant and Castle.

I'm stood by the doors, unable to get a seat due to Italians with their preference for using the seat next to them as a baggage holder. I pull my phone out as is tradition, with a new game of *Angry Birds* to beat. I glance up to look in the reflective surface of the plastic and adjust my hair, hoping nobody notices

this temporary display of vanity.

As I flick my quiff upwards once more I notice something curious as the train begins to slow for the next station. A pattern of lights on the wall, thrumming past in sequence as the train descends deeper. Then suddenly I'm struck once more by the sight again of that pale-faced shape, for a split second visible through the plastic windows of the train. It's perched on the seat inside the alcove of the room with the jewel-shaped light. We could only have been visible to it for the merest of seconds, but for that brief moment I feel its eyes on me and that strange grin playing about its paper-like features. The train speeds on and we reach the next station all at once. I step back, shaken, and fall into a seat as the tourists depart. The driver announces that this train terminates here. I get off and take the stairs on the escalator two at a time. ■



CHOOSE YOUR OWN ZOMBIE ADVENTURE: #3

You plunge breathlessly into the darkness, hoping against hope that you can slip by unnoticed in the chaos. Around you are screams and the noise of combat, almost drowned out by groans and shuffling feet.

Seconds after making your move, you encounter the distinctive stench of rotting flesh. Up ahead of you must be one of the undead,

judging by the putrid air and noxious smell. You gag and try to dodge left. Unexpectedly, your foot catches in something – possibly a missing paving slab or brick. You slip and go down, your ankle twisting agonisingly.

The zombie is on you before you can catch a breath, its cold hands gripping you wetly. You struggle free but another is quickly there on your other side, its rat-

ting breath dripping onto your face. You scream, but it's altogether too late. Sobbing, you feel the press of the horde as they rip you apart, convulsing in an orgy of warm flesh and blood. Seconds from the end, you feel the pain swell and then depart, your senses failing. As the dead devour your rapidly-disappearing body, you hear the sounds of the rest of your group suffering similar fates. You never had a chance. ■

Nine formative moments of my youth & adolescence

Everyone has those memories of the times their life, perhaps temporarily, represented a scene from a movie. You know the kind of thing: rising orchestral swells; slow-motion purposeful strides towards a long-awaited goal; Steven Segal needlessly exploding your best friend's house. There are also the more tragic moments where you're left with a feeling that this latest comic tragedy may well go on to define the rest of your life. Here I've collected nine of these moments in my own personal life, in no particular order.

1. KING FOR A DAY

I was about 14 or so, certainly old enough to know better. Pokémon was all the rage and everyone at school was playing the GameBoy game, watching the TV show and collecting the cards. Other people were probably going to parties and having sex with one another, but then, they didn't know how collect all three Legendary Birds, right? Priorities.

I was a paperboy at the time, getting up every day at 7am to deliver 35 papers across a route totalling a good two or three miles, all for £8 a week. Payday was

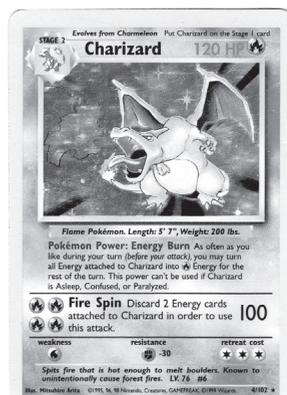
usually a Thursday or Friday morning and that day I'd been given the little paper bag of coins as I arrived at the newsagent to collect my papers. In time-honoured tradition I immediately handed about half of it back over the counter again to purchase a couple of over-priced packets of cardboard rectangles printed with pictures of fictional animals. Pokémon cards.

I was only two or three papers into the route when I decided to stop "saving" the packs as a reward for finishing and to just open them there and then. I stopped outside the corner shop and pulled one of the packets out of my paper bag, ripping it hastily open.

I pulled out the deck of shiny new cards, which began disappointingly with a Weedle. I thumbed to the next card: another Onix. I was just starting to curse myself for continuing to throw away my wages like this when I flipped over the next card. Staring back at me from my gloved hand was the rarest of rarities: a Charizard. A shiny, second edition card featuring the orange-hued king of the Flame Pokémon. I couldn't believe it.

I spent the rest of the paper round excitedly pulling

the card out of my pocket again, checking it was still there, and thinking of the upcoming school day with glee. In my mind, this scenario was pretty close to the moment Charlie unwraps the chocolate bar to discover his Golden Ticket, only instead of free chocolate bars, I'd be gaining the respect and adulation of my peers at school.



The card itself. Look at those HP!

Well, it almost turned out that way. I pulled my nerdy friends aside and wordlessly flashed the card at them. Their gasps and cries of "swap it with us!" were met with my triumphant grin, feeling secure in the knowledge that, finally, I'd won power and influence, all for the cost of £4 worth of lami-

nated cardboard.

It ended badly. Drunk on power in my final class of the day, I foolishly contrived to swap Charizard for five battered, lesser “shinys” with the school bully who’d somehow come upon a stash of cards despite being unable to spell “bulbasaur”. Everyone was clustered around us like two hustling gamblers in the corner of the boys’ PE changing room, and, sweating, I lost my nerve and made the transaction. I never saw Charizard again, but those heady hours of feeling like the most popular nerd in my year group were worth every penny. Probably.

2. NOT LIKE A 90S KIDS’ SPORTS MOVIE

In the village where I lived, there was a patch of undeveloped land (apparently owned by a housing developer who’d never built on it) that was affectionately known as “the dump”. Local kids had worked the piles of soil into ramps and even those S-shaped raised curves I can’t remember the name of, in order to cycle furiously around it.

I was about 12 and had got my first almost ‘adult’ bike for Christmas. It was a bright and shiny beast: a big mountain bike with hefty suspension and gaudy bright blue/orange finish. I remember at the time there was a kid who’d ride around our neighbourhood with a then-mythical Diamondback mountain bike, which he’d flip up into a

wheelie and cycle for devastatingly long stretches along the road near our house, gloriously showing off.

think in my mind this was like the climactic scene of movies like *The Mighty Ducks* where the plucky underdogs



This wasn't my bike, but it's very like it. Except in fluorescent blue/orange.

The first day I rode my proud new bike to “the dump” to go for a spin, I was confronted by a gang of BMX-wielding pre-teens. I pulled up on the top of one of the dirt ramps, my gleaming new bike winking in the sun.

“That bike’s crap”, one kid said immediately.

“Look at the travel, it’s rubbish” another added, pointing at the rubbery tubes of my suspension. I didn’t know what travel was, and moved back warily as one of them leaned over my handlebars and pushed them down, to jeers from the other at the apparently-inferior length.

“It’s not crap!” I shouted, indignant. “Watch this!”

I shook free of the other kids and pedalled wildly down the hill towards the tallest ramp they’d dug. I

rise to glory and win the tournament. Unfortunately for me, I simply rode over the ramp without leaving the ground and, although mercifully staying upright, slowed to a stop.

Feeling I hadn’t quite shown the neighbourhood bullies the error of their ways, I turned and cycled home, angrily cursing my parents for not getting me a bike with better travel, whatever that was.

3. WHO NEEDS BROADBAND?

The year is 2002 and it’s around the same period as the Pokémon episode above, perhaps a year or two later. My friends and I are now far too grown up for pocket

monsters and instead are fascinated by Japanese anime show Dragonball-Z. It's being shown in daily instalments on Cartoon Network that are mindbendingly dragged-out, with the lead-up to the ultimate showdown (Goku vs. Frieza, if you're keeping track) seemingly just out of reach.

We're internet savvy at this point, but all of us are using dialup. Today it would be laughably easy to download the entire series via a torrent and spend a day getting

together by people clearly possessing better bandwidth than we did. They matched clips from the TV show to popular music of the time (almost always aggro-rock and nu-metal) and we loved them. Downloading one to watch was a leap in the dark: bandwidth was too puny to stream a video so instead we'd spend literally hours downloading a 3 minute video which may well be laughably poor, pretending all along that it was "badass, dude".



I'm not ashamed to admit that sourcing this screengrab made me nostalgic.

the payoff we were all awaiting, but back then we had to make do with the tiny Real-Player clips we could glean over our poxy networks before our parents picked up a phone and ruined everything. We'd circulate these gargantuan 2MB downloads amongst one another, sometimes spread over multiple floppy disks, and a few of the more adventurous of us would attempt to recreate the "music videos" we often saw from the fan community.

These clips were put to-

gether by people clearly possessing better bandwidth than we did. They matched clips from the TV show to popular music of the time (almost always aggro-rock and nu-metal) and we loved them. Downloading one to watch was a leap in the dark: bandwidth was too puny to stream a video so instead we'd spend literally hours downloading a 3 minute video which may well be laughably poor, pretending all along that it was "badass, dude".

watch every pixellated second.

4. NOT WINNING BATTLE OF THE BANDS

I was in a band when I was in school. I know, how cool was I? We had a variety of names: Codpiece (no idea), The Vagrants (I still like this one), CPR (this stood for 'CorPorate Rock'), Forté 8 (forté from the musical term for 'loud', 48 because there were 3 of us and we were 16), and finally, Doomed Youth (from the Wilfred Owen poem). We practised at lunchtimes every week at school and people would even crowd outside the window to listen. We weren't very good but we tried.

Our goal was to win the fabled recording session that our school's annual Battle of the Bands contest offered. Crucially, we were the only band who wrote our own songs, whereas the others were all playing covers. In retrospect this might have worked against us but I still believe it meant we were better by default. Of course it did.

A perennial problem with the band was our drummer, Rich. Now, Rich was (and still is) a wonderful human being. He joined the band by chance: I was practicing guitar one lunchtime and he came in and decided to join in on the practice drumkit with some pencils he had. Again, in retrospect this



Doomed Youth, practicing in the rock'n'roll locale of the village Scout Hut. L-R: Rich, Nathan, me, circa July 2003.

should have been a warning sign, but back then we thought it was punk rock and “DIY”. Anyway: Rich wasn’t too keen on the Battle of the Bands and ultimately decided that he couldn’t remember the songs and didn’t want to play it - he bailed out the night before.

This left my me and my fellow Doomed Youth, Nathan, with a quandary. We couldn’t do the songs we’d planned without a drummer and we didn’t know anyone else who could fill in in time. We decided, again with the spirit of punk rock, to just write a bunch of new acoustic songs that night and play them the following evening for the

contest. We also chose to throw in a cover, which was, inexplicably, *Wonderwall* - old hat for cover versions even then.

We practiced, threw together a few riffs, and I remember us both being quietly confident that despite not really being a band at this point, we could still win this thing. I still remember being asked by the Science teacher who was compering the evening what kind of music we played, for his intro speech. “Saskatchewan jazz blues”, I hilariously told him. He introduced us as a “sasquatch blues band”.

The performance only went downhill from there re-

ally. We did get the audience clapping along rhythmlessly with the *Wonderwall* cover (surprisingly distracting when you’re trying to play a guitar) and I think we got some token “awwws” when the presenter told them our drummer had quit. But we didn’t win either. Some band playing covers won (look, our cover was DIFFERENT, alright?).

But you know what? Fuck Battle of the Bands contests anyway, right? They’re meaningless and corporate and don’t discover real raw musical talent, like we had. Winning it wouldn’t have been punk anyway.

There’s video, somewhere.

5. RECORDING AN ALBUM

My music career eventually recovered from losing the Battle of the Bands. Nathan and I decided that we could just save up money from our glamorous part-time dish-washing job at a Chinese

studio just up the road from Nathan's house which would only charge us £250 or so for a couple of evenings' recordings and some mixing/mastering. Best of all, Nathan's mum was away for the week so we essentially decamped to his house and spent the daytimes practicing and writing new songs and the

was having trouble moving.

We stood in the studio as they opened the door to a house reeking of weed and wet dog. Between the two of them they carried in a large flowery sunlounger like a royal litter, and on it lay a long-haired man lying on his front. "Don't fuckin' laugh", he warned us, seeing our



Producer Mark, recording our debut EP with what passed for a hi-tech digital audio setup in October 2003.

restaurant, and pay for a recording session ourselves. Presumably after this, the record contracts and international tours would quickly follow.

We scoured the internet looking for places local to us that were within our price range. Incredibly, we found a

evenings recording them.

Of course, it wasn't without its challenges. When we visited the studios before recording we were greeted by a couple of assistants to Mark, the owner. They were just going to bring him in to meet us, they told us, as he'd had a back problem recently and

faces. We were about sixteen and not really sure what we'd gotten ourselves into.

By the time we were ready to record Mark was upwardly mobile again and he didn't let us down. There were a few musical problems (my insistence on using an awful distortion effects pedal for the

entire process; our drummer Rich's forgetfulness culminating in him leaving half his drumkit at home), but on the whole we loved it. I still wonder today what Mark and his heavy metal-looking housemates made of a bunch of teenagers recording pop-punk songs about rebelling against the government and insomnia, but they got on with it.

I remember proudly handing out the first finished CDs to my friends and family, in the little album sleeve covers I'd designed. We hilariously named the album after a phrase my dad used at the time to describe the stuff we'd listen to: "This'll never replace music". How he laughed.

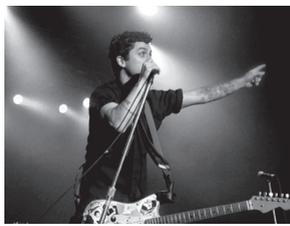
The CD didn't set the world alight and in later years Nathan would go back and re-record it, overdubbing Rich's dodgy drum parts with properly-synchronised computerised ones, and re-doing my tinny-sounding guitar to make it the recording it should have been. The moment, though, that we walked out of the studio clutching a master CD of our week's work, I felt like a rock star. Or at least that the three months of throwing spare ribs into a food bin bigger than me was worth it in the end.

6. FIRST-EVER FESTIVAL

It's 2002 and I'm in the middle of my teenage rock initiation. My favourite band

of the time, Green Day, are headlining a festival in Nottingham where I live. Quite a few other bands are playing too (including someone called Iggy Pop) but all I really care about is Green Day.

Me and all my musically-inclined friends are going... so just me and Nathan, then. I stayed at his place the night before and one of my strongest memories from that excited pre-festival evening was the two of us singing along with *Bohemian Rhapsody* in his bedroom, then his mum and step-dad bursting through the door during the headbanging part to join in, having been listening to our burgeoning falsettos for minutes in fits of laughter.



Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day

We arrived at the festival site bright and early and we were struck by the sheer scale, having never seen so many weird-looking people in one place. I couldn't comprehend where all these people with foot-high green mohawks went when it wasn't festival time, and there was the clear smell of illegal things being smoked.

We met up with a few friends and whiled away the day not really watching the first few bands and experi-

menting with the festival stalls. I proudly bought a t-shirt bearing the legend "AK-47" (with a picture of the gun), followed by "When you absolutely, positively got to kill every motherfucker in the room". I was the coolest fifteen year old in the world.

At some point we're introduced to a friend of a friend, who happens to be a woman in her mid 40s with kids. As a teenager I'm not normally used to being introduced to adults as peers and I try to pretend I'm totally used to this sort of thing as she sways, swigs cloudy cider from an unmarked bottle, and ignores her toddlers who are rolling around the floor all over litter and christ knows what else.

Eventually the main event starts and Green Day take to the stage. I'm crushed in a crowd of people twice my age and height but loving every second of it. There's a girl behind me who alternates between crying hysterically and singing along in a bastardisation of every melody ever penned by the band, not to mention lyric. While this ruins it slightly for me, the ante is upped by the band not choosing me for their customary form-a-band-onstage ritual where they pluck kids from the crowd to play a song onstage, and then sometimes, sometimes let them keep the guitar.

Still, I left the show feeling like I'd crossed some sort of line in my life that I could never return from, in the best way possible. I'd smelt other people's weed while they

smoked it and probably got a bit high off it! I had a t-shirt that said “motherfucker” on it! (had to hide that one from my mum for a year or two). I almost got hit by a pintglass (possibly) full of piss! It was amazing.

7. LONELYBOY@ ANOTHER.COM

Aged fourteen and definitively uncool, I take comfort in the warm, unjudging bosom of the internet. I’m a school “librarian”, which is about as edgy as a beach ball, and probably a few months away from joining the “student council” too. It’s around this time that the newly-popular internet has entered my life.

My school had us using AskJeeves as our first search engine and for a while there are a few other sites, now long-dead, that every pupil seems to have an account with. One of these sites is Another.com, offering a similar product to Hotmail but with the promise of quirky domain names and handles. In a bid to demarcate myself amid my fellow non-nerds, I decide to register the email address “lonelyboy@another.com”. I hadn’t even discovered the Smiths yet.

It got worse. One of the things that fascinated me about the early internet was the prospect of talking to other people from around the world. I discovered chatrooms and after some murky experimentation in the world of Yahoo! Chat and

It’s Web 0.1. They’re a domain reselling company today :(

IRC, stumbled upon a chat room for the computer game The Sims. I had never played The Sims, nor did I want to, but because the room was moderated it meant that the internet’s more unsavoury elements weren’t present. After a few misjudged early usernames (almost exclusively stolen from cooler people’s names I’d seen in other rooms), I went with the memorable “matt57”.

I frequented the room so often that after a while I began to learn the tips and tricks of The Sims as I saw others give them out. After a while I was able to tell others the cheat codes they came in search of without having ever played the game personally. I also became adept at stringing together rudimentary HTML in order to make my chat messages appear in different colours, or even flash. Even now, as a professional web developer, I credit those early days with

giving me an interest in making my own mark on the web. And avoiding potential sex offenders, obviously.

8. DONALD DUCK-GATE

My mum did some childminding after school for a period when I was between 8 and 11 or so. The two kids she looked after were some fairly smarmy local kids whose parents were (I imagine) fairly well off and upmarket. I think they drove a Toyota. The boy was called James and the girl was called Lauren.

In the afternoons when school was finished we’d all pile into my sisters’ bedroom, which, inexplicably, housed the ancient TV and Sega Master System we had, which they never played. I was the proud owner of “Lucky Dime Caper”, a Disney game starring Donald Duck.

It was surprisingly unforgiving for a kids' game and I'd struggled to get past the first three levels in the past. Today, though, I was on a roll. I'd not only reached level five but I'd done it without dying once, too. The other kids watched as I played.

Suddenly, it all went wrong. A beehive landed on my head; I ran out of frisbees; then suddenly I was down to one life. A single mis-timed jump later and that was it: game over.



The game was much harder (and less minimalist in terms of HUD) than this screengrab makes it look. Not pictured: beehive full of angry bees about to unexpectedly drop on Donald's head.

“Fuck!” I not-so-quietly cursed. I was about ten years old. Someone else took over and then it was time for dinner. I sulked for a bit in protest.

A little later, my mum told me with a stern look that I was to go into the garden to speak to my dad. Uncertain of what was to come, I wandered outside and sat down opposite him. It was a warm summer evening.

“Did you swear in front of the other children?” he asked me.

“What? When?” I said, scared at his omnipotence.

“On the computer game. James came and told me”. James! The little shit!

“Oh... no.”

“Are you telling me the truth, Matthew? He says you said the ‘F’ word.”

“Yes. I didn’t say that. I was saying... *duck*. As in, Donald Duck. We were playing the Donald Duck game.”

I don’t think he believed me. I don’t think I believed me. I thought for a second that his mouth twitched a little as he tried not to laugh at this pitiful attempt at getting out of it. Maybe it worked, though, because I got away with it with little more than a warning to watch my language.

I never felt the same about James afterwards, though, the little fuck.

9. PE TEACHER VENGEANCE

We had two PE teachers at school: Mr Giles and Mr Mellor. Mr Giles was young and all the girls fancied him. He was very sporty and typically athletic, but he also made the effort with the kids like myself who weren’t natural sportsmen. I remember in my later school years he took the trouble to recommend some music to me (Bauhaus, since you asked), and knew me well enough to do so. Mr Mellor, on the other hand, only knew the sporty lads’ names and spent most of our lessons with the “more advanced” group, while the rest of us struggled with trying to work out how to do a scrub.

When I finished school I decided to write a letter to Mr. Mellor and tell him what I thought about his teaching technique. Here, reproduced in full, is that letter.

Sunday, 13 July 2003

Dear Mr Mellor,

You probably won’t be able to put a face to my name, but I’m a former Y11 pupil at Seely.

I’m writing this letter to just express some thoughts and feelings about the way PE is currently being taught at CFS.

I feel that several of the PE staff show a blatant favouritism in their teaching, towards those children who are talented at the sports. While this may seem logical upon first look, when seeing



The rugby games we had to play at school never, ever looked like this. Except for the pained expressions, possibly.

this situation from an opposite point of view, it seems to hold less sense.

Surely the pupils that are less good at the sports are the ones that need more encouraging? A pupil that is already good at the subject and is self-motivated (i.e., belongs to a sports club or is a member of a team) is obviously not in need of encouragement, unlike the pupil who would like to get better, but feels alienated when his PE teacher has little respect for him.

For example, your colleague Mr Giles. He knows the name of every pupil in the school, and takes a personal interest in each and every one. When he saw that myself and some of my friends were not getting a particularly great game during football season, he offered to arrange for us to take our PE lessons in the fitness suite, where the atmosphere was less competitive. He even suggested some bands for me to listen to, knowing that I play guitar

in a band of my own.

However, I feel that if I stood in front of you and asked you say my name, you would fail. Proof of this comes in the form of my Year 11 PE report, which commented on my improvements in basketball, which, incidentally, I had only done for one actual session over the last four terms. If you are going to write generic reports, it may be an asset if you check your facts first.

In the past, during rugby classes, I remember you arranging two groups for teams; the more confident players, and the less adept ones. This was a good system, at least it meant that those pupils who were not skilled enough to get much of a game ordinarily could still play. However, I remember you spending most of the lesson working with the better group, leaving those of us who weren't in this group to have a meagre game where we felt little motivation to play.

Another example is your

colleague Miss Copestake. During the last few weeks of school, she came into the squash courts where we were playing, and asked me if I was a new pupil, as she hadn't seen me before. This not only insulted me, but hurt me. I am not a pupil that blends into the background, and only a few weeks previous to this event, I was present in 2 months worth of Badminton classes, taught by none other than Miss Copestake. Her failure to recognize me, even after grading me personally on my work, was quite upsetting.

I hope this letter has helped you realise how the children that you neglect are feeling in your classes. Perhaps you could show this letter to some of your colleagues, it may increase awareness.

Yours sincerely,
Matt Andrews

§

He never did reply. ■

Bury me on the internet.

When I die, bury me on the internet.

I'm serious. It's been the biggest influence on my life to date (sorry, mum and dad). I learned all my formative lessons there. I discovered music, found friends when my tragic teenage years meant I had nothing in common with almost everyone at school, and learned a trade which has eventually culminated in a career of sorts (see, dad, I wasn't "just messing about" all those years). It's the greatest revolution in communication in centuries and the impact it's having and will have on human society is almost impossible to measure. In science fiction, authors dream up advanced and incomprehensible methods to share information and communicate from across galaxies, but all it really boils down to is email and a web server. We live in the future.

The only thing it hasn't really sorted out yet is death. We're still trapped in these pesky human bodies, weak and temporary. When someone dies, Facebook convert their profile page into a memorial account. That's about as good as it gets. Email providers are famously difficult to persuade into giving relatives access to the late person's messages, and there's a whole problem yet to be solved of internet-based friendships whose partici-

pants may not ever discover that their missing friend is in fact deceased.

Well, consider this my last will and testament. When I die, hopefully of something memorable and awe-inspiring (possibly falling down a ravine and wussing out of chopping my own hand off), I'd like my family and friends to make me a permanent part of the information su-



perhighway, as nobody calls it. I see things online all the time about the bizarre objects people have their dead relatives turned into. Some company somewhere can turn your dead dog's ashes into a crystal. I'm not asking for luxury, folks. All I want is for some boffin somewhere to turn whatever's left of my dehydrated corpse into an ethernet cable, or, if I'm really lucky, an undersea pipe carrying data across the Atlantic. In that form I'd live on forever: little bits of my body and soul working as

conduits to transfer news, emails, pornography and illegal movie torrents across the internets. It's the only way to live forever, the only way we could reincarnate. For one millisecond I could be a pixel in a famous artwork; in the next I might be a binary sequence in an FBI email exchange. Kilobytes later I could be reborn as a line of code in a web application somewhere, and in decades to come my earthly remains might be used to send a declaration of peace across the wires. On the other hand, I could end up being used to circulate child porn or something, but beggars can't be choosers.

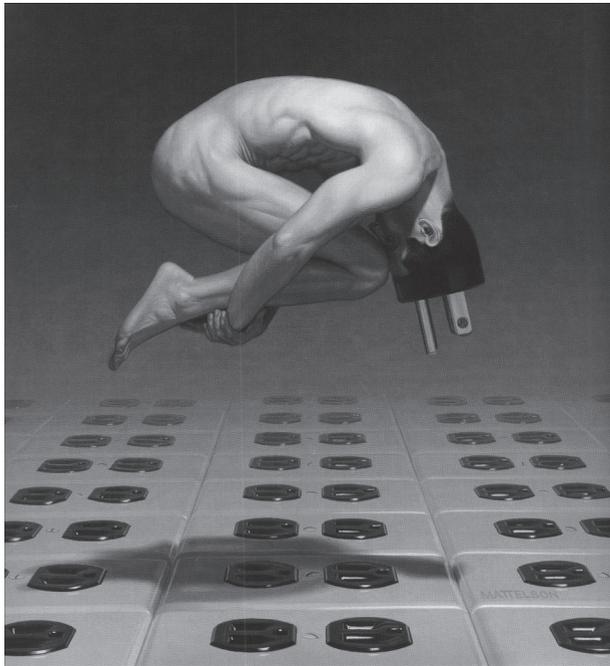
The internet is probably humanity's greatest invention (if anyone's reading this in the future where the internet is regarded in the same way we think of Pot Noodles today, then I retract this statement). People have had their ashes launched into space, buried at sea, sent out in Viking longships and fired from a cannon. I'd like to be the first person to be able to go, well, into the matrix. And look, to be honest, by the time I'm dead, I won't know any better. Let me close my eyes for the final time, smiling as I babble on about humanity and communication, then smear my ashes on a Linksys wireless modem or something. Just bury me on the internet. ■

Victims of our own design

So what's the big problem with consuming things?

Society is in a kind of limbo state, although you wouldn't guess it to look at it. In the past decade we've experienced a profound change in how we communicate, and a vast new world of networking and information has been unlocked. Politicians are still wondering how to control it, businesses are figuring out how to monetise it, and average joes like you and me are enjoying all of the perks: now we can stream *Mad Men* on our mobile phones, download David Bowie's back catalogue in less time than it takes to listen to *Life on Mars* all the way through, and search for, purchase and begin reading *War and Peace* while sitting on the bus to work. It's massively exciting.

The limbo part comes when we think on a more macro scale. Platforms for distribution are only now starting to achieve some form of standardisation and the industry struggle for copy protection still isn't concluded. Everyone's convinced of the value of sharing data and widening access, but there's no single, simple way of doing it, unless you're willing to lock yourself into proprietary systems.



Artwork by Marvin Mattelson for MTV, 1990

Nobody except neckbearded Unix devotees really wants to care about the specifics of open/closed consumption. People want convenience and companies like Facebook, Apple and Google want to give it to them. Why shouldn't they? The internet is a brilliant tool for this and it has the power to change everybody's lives for the better. There's just something that's missing

from the picture.

The convenience of giving us everything we want on a plate is like the digital equivalent of winning the lottery. The initial euphoria of receiving the massive cardboard cheque eventually fades after you buy your first mansion or luxury car. You quit your job and bask in the glow of never having to sit at a desk again. A year later

and you're sitting on your real leather couch watching the latest HD movies on your 86 inch flatscreen TV, and you've got nothing to do with yourself anymore.

The new consumption is the same. You create a Netflix account and gasp with excitement at the endless reams of television and movies you can cram into your eyeballs. You gorge on content, watching cult classic film and 90s cartoons, wondering how they can get away with charging so little for this. There's literally more on offer than you could watch in a lifetime!

Again. **There's literally more on offer than you could watch in a lifetime.**

Why do we want all this choice, all this data? When you go to a restaurant, you don't order the entire menu, giggling with glee as you survey the heaving tables as you decide which meal to sample first. Some of the best restaurants have brief, calculated menus, tailoring the experience and allowing some choice without it growing so large that it becomes endless, meaningless. When you sit in front of a television with more minutes to watch than there are stars visible in the sky, there's something wrong.

In the internet's early days,

the barrier to entry was higher. At first you needed to be an academic, or possibly in the military. These early message boards and websites often picked up in activity during the autumn when new students and graduates arrived, and this was eventually exacerbated by AOL's early movements online. ISPs offered limited webspace for customers and some early entrepreneurs set up websites offering free, ad-supported webspace. If you were prepared to struggle

Born into cyberspace, these kids will see their entire lives rendered digitally. Facebook, Google and the rest have taken the power Gutenberg gave the world and removed the wealth and power restrictions, levelling publishing and communication enormously. Great, right?

The problem with this ubiquity is that it hides the inner workings; makes it less useful to understand and appreciate the construction and design. When you save up and buy a car,

you're probably going to learn about how it works under the hood, whether intentionally or not. You can be damn sure that when it breaks down, you're going to be very interested to know what's happening in the engine and how it can be fixed. You may not know how to do it yourself but likewise you're probably going to develop a little knowledge about the mechanical ingenuity going on underneath the bonnet.

Conversely, when the bus into the city breaks down, you couldn't give a damn what caused it, instead focused on getting to where you need to be. You don't have any personal investment beyond the cost of the bus ticket and it's not going to come back to haunt your thoughts weeks later, as you dwell on whether it was the



Artwork by stickitto via Flickr (<http://flic.kr/p/8k4tkv>)

through the clunky interfaces, poorly-documented code and ad-infested layouts, you could take the first step of self-publishing on the internet and create something unique.

Today, it's trivial to create a webpage. There are month-old children with Facebook pages, curated by their well-meaning parents.

fan belt or the carburettor. If this analogy hasn't become too laboured, hopefully the correlation is clear: the modern consumption-driven internet is the bus: you don't care how it works, as long as it continues to work. You've got no interest in finding out what makes it go, but you'd complain if it suddenly broke down.

Life is short. People seem busier than ever, perhaps as a consequence of the always-on connection the internet has given to us. Watch your friends next time one of them receives a text message or notification alert on her mobile phone. The noise will suddenly interrupt and her ears will prick up and her head will turn as she seeks out the source of the sound. Often she'll pause whatever she was doing and get up to examine the phone, often becoming unresponsive to conversation or delayed in reply as she reads whatever the message was. Chances are you've done this yourself, possibly to the detriment of a real, physical conversation taking place around you at the time.

Is this always-on data really worth dropping everything for, or are we conditioning ourselves to be data addicts? Wake up, check your email, go on Facebook. What are we hoping for? Some life-changing, earth-shattering status update that will change everything for someone? We've trivialised human communication. Think how many boring, self-indulgent, pointless pieces of information you've

idly consumed this week. Are there better uses for this global network we've built?

I challenged myself this month to live a 'no consumption April'. The remit included no TV, no movies, no games, no books, no music, no anything where I was merely taking input instead of producing output. I failed, of course. I watched TV (usually guiltily over my partner's shoulder). I went to see movies (rainy Sunday evenings, there's little else to do). I read magazines (telling myself they were exempt anyway). I listened to new albums coming out during the month, or even old ones. Not consuming is hard.

You've got no interest in finding out what makes it go, but you'd complain if it broke down.

Crucially, though, I made the effort to create. I tried to come home in the evenings from work and write something, anything. I picked up my guitar and instead of idly strumming a favourite artist's song, I had a go at writing my own. I carried a notebook and pen with me on the tube to work and occasionally even wrote something in it, when the lure of *Angry Birds* wasn't too powerful. I made this zine.

This isn't meant to be preaching. Entertainment is

important, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, and there's nothing inherently wrong with enjoying and experiencing the work of others.

My concern today is that the brave new world of the internet and new technology has shifted the balance too far the other way. We all know how to look up an address on Google Maps on our phones, but we're losing the ability to find our way without GPS and touchscreens. We're comfortable relying on websites every day of our lives but not having the first idea about how to program one. We sit back and watch every US television import, not pausing to wonder if we could ever write a script or film a pilot.

The thing that I keep coming back to is brevity of existence. I'm trying to live my life with the idea that my death could be around the corner. If I got hit by a bus next week, what would be my legacy? In my dying moments as the blood leaked out of me, would I regret spending the previous evening reading Twitter updates and watching *The Office*? I want to unwind after a long day and I want to zone out and let my brain rest, sure. But with a lack of any clear meaning of life or endgame for being a human being, my own motivation is to try to at least achieve a 50/50 split between consuming from the ever-growing menu of media and technology, and adding a few of my own dishes to the menu. ■



You're holding copy # _____ of **I'm a Pretender** issue 3, spring 2012

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NOTES

I'm a Pretender is printed by the kind folks at CLP London.

There's a website, but all it really does is allow you to order copies of the zine, which may well be a little redundant in this case. If not, it's available at www.threechords.org/pretender

If you prefer your reading in digital format, then most of the articles here are also available online at www.threechords.org/blog. But print is so much more fun, right?

All content is by Matt Andrews unless otherwise indicated. Thanks for reading!

COLOPHON

I'm a Pretender is set in Lora for body copy and Oswald for display. The above photo is the Bay Bridge in San Francisco, taken by me in February 2012 on a phone. Other photos are taken from Creative Commons-licensed actual photographers, with real cameras and everything.