

**BELFAST TINSEL:
LETTERS TO GERALD**

Phillip McCrum

Part the First

The sky was another similar cloud as yesterday. There is only Orange journalism here yet people are surprisingly capable of hurting each other. Bomb the wee Catholics; send a brick through the back of a girls' school-bus. Both everyone supports the American antiterrorism pledge, but who supports it more? A lack of international media has not stopped violence here—and maybe increased it—but major players lament their time in the spotlight. Osama Ben O'Brien is the main suspect. (No relation to Erin although the name has come up.) I don't know if I can take it and I thought myself impervious even to my own desires but my fear and loathing could be just narcissism. It's not the first time—throw a pebble willya and break the navel staring contest. "I've always been beautiful at this time of year." Like the iridescent drip of dog gob—I was enjoying that till I got all wet. Shake a paw.

Belfast's a great place to sit and share a glass of beer with a few murderers—and they look like murder too—but even the school girls look like murderers in this town. You can't get a jar of nothing without first ringing a bell but after that its pretty much "Thanks and how are you?" and "Thanks again"—"No, the small ones are pounds and the little ones are 20 and the big ones are ten except when they have edges and then they are 50 and those small ones are five," and "It's OK. I've figured out about the copper ones." It cost 20p to stand in a phone booth and have it tell you you need another 20p to stand there some more. The friendly "Northerners" will talk you right through your change without slipping in a single direction—so it's all "Where are you?" and "That's a brave walk from there." Which means although it's three blocks on the map they forgot to pencil in the barbed wire and fences so you have to walk a little ways south then north then east. "Do you know where Broadway Parade is?" "I think so," says a wary native, eyebrow cocked, and thinking, "You're not from around here are ye cowboy?" "It's flagged. They paint their curbs red white and blue." *Lanslammer, lanslammer ich bin auslander!* I'm on a game show and about to lose—what did you say can I call a friend?—20p ppp . . .

After a brave walk, there it is, turn the corner in what has been politely referred to as a slum and suddenly it's like Christmas on the Fourth of July. Red-white-blue banners strung across the street and each house has a flag-post and a flag proudly installed. No people, just the pull of drapes and crack of blinds as you stroll to—now that your halfway there where the fuck are you going? The sidewalks are all half so you keep falling in the road, ahead is a bevy of small square-headed bald boys, little rascals from hell. Behind Miss Misfit of enormous size that she can't, apparently, zip up any article of clothing or close her mouth, walks the dog and something else in the stroller with legs. I reach the destination on my little sheet of paper after accidentally pushing one of the sweet young boys in front of oncoming traffic. "Oops, sorry young fella." "Oye ya daft fucker," he replies without his lips moving. The driver swerves to engage, it is after all survival of the fittest down here, but our hero is marvelous: pirouette, leap, turn, and spit, parabolic gooplem missiles through the air, a smart gob reaches its target. A toot of appreciation and the applause of the wipers and both vanish with only the slightest echo of "*Ya fucgencunt!*" The house apparently for rent is painted purple, no flag pole, and a tiny rainbow sticker in the window. "Hmms," I think to meselfs just as inertia brings the lady of the lane into my territorial imperative. "Hello," I say, "Glab bo micsub fucker bligh gone issu?" "Eh" I say, as Jack (I imagine the pit bull's name) looks either to fuck my leg or eat it. The general gravitational mass seems to be dragging me towards her milky eyes. Just then a wind change brings a gag reflex and I convulse myself around her apparently unnoticed except for a now broken-hearted Jack. Oye, I think to myself: this must be the feeling mountaineers get after the euphoria. I only halfway done my brave walk. It should rain about now—and so it did.

Part the Second

Champ is Belfast comfort food. There are plenty of other starches available but the mix of mash and scallions and/or onions or leeks or kale or something else is pervasive and it comes with a variety of sides or as a side—gravy and champ, beans and champ, the champ buttie (champ and chips really, a serious mistake even as a perverse gesture), champ and sausage, champ with the Ulster fry. My first breakfast here in a little B & B after getting kicked out of the international youth hostile for not wanting to share a room with stinking youth. "I'm a communist—Stalin never had to share a room!" "There's a nice B & B around the corner, Comrade, which you will like." The owner met me at the door well-dressed with wads of cotton sticking out of her mouth. Eventually her morning at the dentist revealed itself and I was sent up to a small room behind "Blithian" or something like that. Her, Blithian



Belfast Tinsel 2002 Photo: Phillip McCrum

(not the owner's) main distinguishing feature, was caked on make-up (my first Milly) that rendered her incapable of articulating her head one way or the other. The breakfast was my first experience of fried bread served with toast, sausage on the side. Yummy, I thought, this will be perfect with my whiskey headache and suspect bowels.

In reality Belfast is a series of communities you don't want to live in surrounding an area that attempts to ignore they are there. The Troubles seem to exist only in the morning newspaper somewhere over there under a few hovering helicopters. I live near one of the universities, Queens, which is large and about a mile from the Art College, which is small. I call the area linking the two the Vein because it's really just a series of a few streets that run between the two schools with the City Hall ("The most Famous building in the City") right in the middle. On Saturday the Goths and Goth Punks hang out there, maybe a hundred or so all dressed in black and pale and being anti-social and safe because if they were anywhere else they'd get beat up. On either side of the Vein are the communities, East, West, North Belfast, and places you don't go at night, with "Peace Walls" built to discourage the tossing of pipe-bombs from one street to another. Lovely murals depict the victories of the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Defense League. In some strange way they seem like teenage drawings of heavy-metal covers.

They are mad shoppers and on the weekends the city center fills wall-to-wall, mall-to-mall, with people. I think it must have to do with being able to go freely around after so many years of having to go through checkpoints and gates and metal detectors. It can be dangerous. I have learnt that men will not make eye contact and will move out of each other's way. Little old ladies will not be moved and mothers—and by that I mean teenage girls with strollers—will plough you over and leave you for dead. As I am North American, I find myself always looking the wrong way and walking down the wrong side of the sidewalk. In Germany which side of the sidewalk is the correct side to walk down would be clear but here it a little less ordered (read as understatement). I have found that you can walk straight at the men and they will move, probably thinking you're some mad bastard and no one wants a confrontation, the consequences are too dear. Old ladies can be pushed out of the way and there does seem to be a concerted effort by the younger populace to push them into the oncoming traffic. I have not yet completed my study of this.

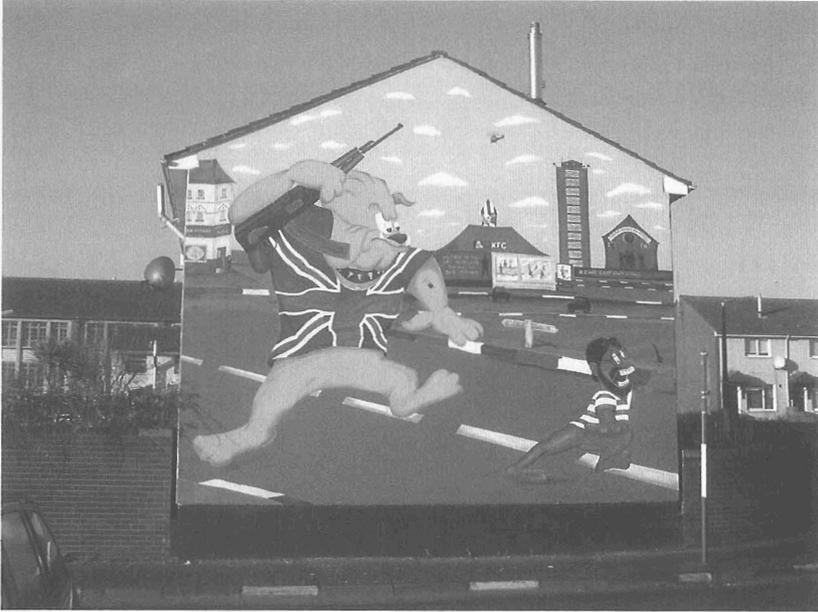
The stroller menace is countered by the pointy ully, which has to be held in such a way as to threaten the child in the stroller. It is the only way to get through a mall. Still it is a game of chicken with strollers coming at you at break-neck speed, swerving at the last moment inches from your nervous ully. One must be strong to get to point B although there never is a point B

because you can never “Get there from here.” However, there is no counter to the Millies and one must simply let them pass. The Millies are the female counterpart to the Spides. These are a group of young people distinguished by their class, working, and their dress. Millies and Spides come in both Green and Orange varieties, yet seem not to recognize their similarities but only the differences. Belfast is like the Galapagos with several communities cut off from the rest and so there are specific regional varieties but Millies have these general characteristics. Exposed midriff. Hair is tightly pulled back on head and made into a bun or ponytail. Heavy eyeliner, mascara, etc., always—and I mean always—large hoop earrings, platform shoes (but sneakers will do). Tight t-shirts and jeans although some vary slightly and go for a Spide look with basic track-suit and sneaker. Always a cig and must say “Fuck off!” every few seconds. Canned tan is optional, but preferred. If over sixteen, should have at least one child.

The Spides (short for Spidermen), are not vocal unless in a pack, minimum four. They will gang up on the SPAR convenience stores and unattended tip jars. They wear track-suits, usually quite dull colours, off-greens, light-browns, chalky yellows, sneakers, hair close-cut up to the hairline where a short tuft is grown and gelled to stand up very much like a rooster’s comb. They can be dangerous but usually they are not because they have the peculiar habit of sniffing glue. They all sniff glue. It is a strange sight. One night I was walking home from the university, it was foggy and the street light made for one of those eerie moments and as I was walking I could see coming out of the shadows towards me these shapes, four hooded figures stumbling towards me very slowly and strangely. Their arms were flapping away from their sides in the wind and they didn’t have faces. As I got closer I could see that these teenage boys had covered their faces with their track-suit hoods so that only their eyes showed, pulled their arms out of their sleeves and under their sweats, so that they could hold a plastic bag over their mouths and noses as they walked along. They were completely and utterly fucked and the fumes of glue were intense. You see them everywhere: these teenagers with no arms and no faces standing stupefied on street corners snorting glue, perhaps waiting to get the news on their place in the New World Order.

Excerpt from a Letter

New digs near the Ormeau Road, famous for a shooting or two and the Orange Man March each July that’s blocked off half-way across the bridge. It’s funny how I’ve actually gotten used to the violence here just because, as in most places, if you’re not involved you’re safe. I walk through dodgy neighbourhoods all the time, but not after dark ‘cause they can’t tell your



Protestant Paramilitary Murals, Belfast 2002. Photos: Phillip McCrum



accent in the dark. Lots of kids seem to kill themselves with pipe-bombs and the police don't go into certain areas so the discipline is the responsibility of the paras. Our roommate, Gumball, tells us a story about a fellow who got crucified on a fence—stole cigs from a local grocery. Yesterday a teenager was shot in each ankle. He'll never dance to Pink Floyd again. But I digress.

Excerpt 2

Everyone gets a nickname here, well the “boys” do—it still seems a rather patriarchal culture in most ways. Just sexism, sectarianism, racism and homophobia, but otherwise, if you exclude the Spides and Millies, a very liberal attitude prevails indeed. I am called Meatball, which I have tried to dissuade by threats of violence, which does work. There is Humpty Head, who is also known as Squinty (glasses and bald), Johnny Socks (he stashed pot in his socks to get across the German border and the dogs could not detect the pot because of the smelly socks), Flynnagain (another Canadian, from Toronto, who often repeats his stories), Stinky Steve (guess), Twiggy (derived from a story about an early sexual experience). These are all first-year students except myself and Stinky Steve, who is a friend of Gumball's and a drug dealer. (I don't allow Stinky Steve in the house.)

Excerpt 3

My head is filled with green men hammering away searching for gold or a route to France. Ouch!

I have met the Belfast Spider and we have become friends. I talk and talk to these people and they all think I am joking. I must shoot one or two to let them know I am serious! In the leg or arm, some fleshy part that won't maim but will be a constant reminder.

I can't think of a thing to do. Mostly I set up two mirrors over a bucket of dry ice and a spotlight and play some German noise-bands backwards. They think I am a genius because I buy the beer and know what a jpeg is-- the music seems to attract vampires but they don't like the Irish because they get drunk on their blood, and, in the end, vampires are quite sensitive, music lovers, writers of poetry, and closet soap-opera watchers. I don't mind them personally but find their high-pitched voices irritating. I have been known to squeeze garlic into their Bloody Marys. It is childish and vindictive, I know, but I am going through a mid-life crisis. I'm Magic-Marking in a hairline, shaving my eyebrows, using bleach on these green-grey teeth. I'm gluing in extra teeth as well—well, large white sugar-covered gum. They last for only one black beer; then the sugar coating dissolves and drips down over my lips as the grey gum is exposed and becomes tacky and

then spreads over the rest of my teeth creating slow gaps which fill reluctantly with beer bubbles. I keep thinking: "Is my ass large in this?" It always has been so I don't understand my own concerns. I fall in love with all the red-haired girls. Its very time consuming. Yesterday I followed a blond for two blocks imagining her twenty years younger and ginger. Her ass was big in that, and, come to think of it, my reflection spotted me older than my thoughts. I rammed quite hard into a truculent teen wearing the wrong jersey for this part of town who probably took my mistake for a sectarian wobble.