

EARLY RISER

The winter is about to get a new legend

*Birgitta? We shared a dream together a few years back.
Her husband shared the same dream, too, so it was kind of
crowded in there. He was dead, which helped - and so was
she, which didn't.*

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For

*Rhulen Marya Ivy Anna Fforde-Gorringe
Made in Australia but inspired by Wales*

And who knows a thing or two about hibernation

Chapter: Mrs Tiffen could play the Bazouki

"..Hibernation is more survivable since the introduction of Dormitoria, efficient weight-gain regimes and Morphenox, but superstition and fear remains. The Hib is about rest and renewal as much as about dodging the Winter's worst, and we did our bit to make the oily tar of longsleeep seem warm and friendly.."

- from *Seventeen Winters* by Consul James Spanner (missing, assumed eaten)

Mrs Tiffen could play the bazouki. Not well, and only one tune: *Help Yourself* by Tom Jones.

She plucked the strings expertly but without emotion while staring blankly out of the train window at the ice and snow. She and I had not exchanged an intelligent word since we first met five hours before, and the reason was readily explained: Mrs Tiffen was dead, and had been for several years.

"It's going to be a mild winter," said the grey-haired woman sitting opposite Mrs Tiffen and I as the train pulled out of Cardiff Central, "Average low of only minus forty is my guess."

"Almost balmy," I replied, and we both laughed, even though it wasn't funny, not really, not at all.

After some thought, I had concluded that the woman was most likely an actor, part of the extensive Winter Thespian Tradition. Audiences were small, but highly appreciative. Summer players had to make do with the diluted respect of the many whilst Winter Players commanded the adoration of the few.

The train stopped briefly at Queen Street after leaving Cardiff Central, then rumbled slowly North. It could have gone faster, but Wales has a 75 dB sound limit in operation eight days either side of the winter¹.

"Have you overwintering long?" I asked, by way of conversation.

"I've not seen a Summer for almost three decades," she said with a smile. "I remember my

¹ No-one knows quite why. Something to do with St David's Day.

first venue: Hartlepool, Winter of '76, The Don Hector Playhouse. We were performing *King Lear* as the support act to the Chuckle Brothers during their one and only Winter tour. Their gig was packed - almost three hundred people. Never seen that happen before except with The Bonzo Dog Band or Val Doonican, but then they made the Winter Season a kind of a trademark, like Mott the Hoople and Richard Stilgoe in the old days and Paul Daniels and *Take That* today."

Few Summer acts chose to bold the cold - the Winter could be a hard task master. The 1974 Showaddywaddy Welsh tour was a good case in point: The band were first trapped by Hunger-crazed nightwalkers in their Aberystwyth hotel, then lost half their number to an ice-storm. Over the next two months their manager was kidnapped and ransomed by 'Lucky' Ned Farnsworth, three roadies lost their feet to frostbite, and their bassist was allegedly taken by Wintervolk. Aside from that, the surviving members thought it was one of their most successful tours ever.

"Never realised how strongly the silence could drag upon one's psyche," said my companion, breaking into my thoughts, "and how the solitude can become physically painful. I once went seven weeks without seeing a single soul, stranded in the Oban Playhouse during a protracted coldsnap in '78. Colder than the Gronk's tit and for four weeks a blizzard. Even the Villains hunkered down, and nightwalkers froze on their feet. Come the melt the rigor kept them upright - they didn't start falling until they'd thawed down to their shins. For those not with the calling the absence of humanity can be debilitating." She paused for a moment before continuing. "But y'know, in some strange way, I love it. Good for achieving a sense of ... *clarity*."

Long time Winterers were well known to express their views in this manner - a dark love of the bleakness, and how conducive the solitude was to deep philosophical thought. More often than not, those that extolled the Winter virtues so fulsomely did so right up until the moment they left an overly apologetic note, stripped themselves naked and walked outside into the sub-zero. It was called 'The Cold Way Out'.

"Lobster," said Mrs Tiffen without relevance to anything, still playing the bazouki. *Help Yourself*, again, for perhaps the two hundredth time.

Returning from the depths of Hibernation was never without risk. If the minimal synaptic tick-over that took care of nominal life functions were halted, you'd suffer a neural collapse and be Dead in Sleep. If you ran out of fats to metabolise into usable sugars, you'd be Dead in Sleep. If the temperature fell too far too quickly, you'd be Dead in Sleep. Vermin predation, CO2 buildup, calcitic migration, pre-existing medical condition or a dozen or so other complications - Dead in Sleep.

But not all neural collapses led to death. Some, like Mrs Tiffen, awoke with just enough vestigial memory to walk and eat. And while most people saw nightwalkers as creepy brain-dead denizens of the winter whose hobbies revolved around mumbling and cannibalism, we saw them as someone who had returned from the dark abyss of hibernation with most of everything left behind. They were normally rounded up before everyone woke, usually to be redeployed and then parted out, but stragglers that slipped the net could sometimes be found. Billy DeFroid discovered one snagged on some barbed wire in the orchard behind St Granata's three weeks after Springrise. He reported it to the authorities but not before taking its wristwatch, something I believe he still has to this day.

"Seven down," said the actor, having to raise her voice to be heard above Mrs Tiffen's bazouki, "*slow to pen a plumber's handbook?*"

"I'm not good with crosswords," I shouted back, then added: "I hope the bazouki playing isn't troubling you unduly?"

The thespian smiled.

"Not really," she said, "but at least it keeps numbskulls out of the carriage."

She was right. Today was Slumberdown Minus One, the last full day before the Winter officially begun. The train was busy with Mothballers and Overwinterers, trying to get to their relevant

Dormitoria or work as status dictated. Several passengers had tried to join us in our compartment but after taking one look at Mrs Tiffen's glassy nightwalker stare they hurried on past.

"To be honest I rather like Tom Jones," she added, "does she play *Delilah* or *She's a Lady*?"

"It would help," I said, "for variety's sake. But no."

The train followed the frozen river up North past Castell Coch, and as the billowy clouds of white vapour from the locomotive drifted past the window I could see that winter shutdown was very much in evidence - shutters were closed and barred, vehicles swaddled in layers of waxed hesian, flood sluices greased and set to auto. It was all quite exciting in a dangerously thrilling kind of way. My initial trepidation regarding overwintering had soon changed to adventurous curiosity. Enthusiasm might come, in time, but my sights were set on a loftier goal: Survival. A third of first time novices in the winter Consul Services never saw the Spring.

"So," said the actor, nodding towards what had once been Mrs Tiffen, "Harboured ²?"

"By her husband for five years."

Most people to whom I mentioned this displayed a sense of disgust; not the actor.

"He must have loved her."

"Yes," I agreed, "he gave everything he had to protect her."

While Mr Tiffen had regarded his wife as someone with profound neurological issues, we saw her as little more than another casualty of the winter. The bazouki playing was merely a quirk, a vestigial memory from a mind that once crackled with personality and creative energy.

We pulled into Abercynon station with a hiss. The passengers moved about the platform with commendable silence, easily explained: Those now heading for the grateful joy of slumber were too fatigued to celebrate, and those planning to overwinter had only the anxieties of a lonely sixteen weeks to dominate their thoughts. Little was said as the passengers embarked and disembarked,

² Legally speaking: 'The non surrender or retention for whatever reason of any person in a Pseudosentient Mobile Vegetative State.'

and even the signalman's clicker seemed to have lost its usual sharpness.

"The courts are usually lenient if there's a family component," said the actor in a quiet voice, "mind you, harbouring is harbouring."

"They'll be no trial," I said, "her husband's dead - and with honour."

"The best sort in my view," said the woman thoughtfully, "I hope for the same myself. What about you? Many winters under your belt?"

"This is my first."

She looked at me with such a sense of shocked surprise that I felt quite unnerved.

"*First winter?*" she echoed incredulously, "And they've sent you on nightwalker delivery duty to Sector Twelve?"

"I'm not *exactly* alone," I said, "there's—"

"—first winters should always be spent indoors, taking notes and acclimatising," she said, ignoring me, "I've lost far too many newbies to be anything but sure of *that*. What did they do? Threaten to thump you?"

"No."

They didn't need to. I'd volunteered, quite happily, eight weeks before, during the Fat Thursday celebrations.

Chapter: Fat Thursday

"...The length of time humans have hibernated has shifted subtly, mostly due to climatic conditions and advances in agriculture. 'Standard Winter' was adopted in 1775 and fixed to eight weeks either side of winter solstice. From Slumberdown to Springrise, 99.99% of the population submit to the dark abyss of sleep.."

The Hiberculture of Man - Morris Desmond

Fat Thursday had been long established as the first day of serious gorging, the time to indulge in the latest faddy get-fat-quick diets and to take a vow of abstinence from the mass-stealing sin of exercise. Yesterday you could run for a bus and no-one would turn a hair, tomorrow it would be frowned upon as almost criminally irresponsible. For the two months until Slumberdown, every calorie was sacred; a fight to keep every ounce. Spring only ever welcomed the mass-diligent.

Skinny Pete went to sleep, underfed and bony

Skinny Pete went to sleep, and died a death so lonely

My job of Assistant House Manager was under the generally amenable and delegation-addicted Sister Zygotia, which made Fat Thursday celebrations pretty much my responsibility. And while leaving me open to perhaps more criticism than usual, it was a welcome break from the day to day tedium of running St. Granata's Pooled Parentage Station³. Basically, Fat Thursday required only three things: Enough food, enough chairs, and try not to let Sister Placentia get her hands on the gin.

Megan Hughes was the first to arrive. She'd spent twelve years at the Pool until she got picked out by a wealthy couple in Bangor. Was married last I heard to someone big in the Mrs Nes-bit Traditional Tearooms empire, and was now one of St Granata's patrons: We made a good in-

³ Unofficial motto: 'Keeping up the numbers so you don't have to.'

come selling child offsets to people like Megan who saw the whole baby thing as insufferably farm-yard.⁴ It was sort of ironic, really, that she had a career at *OffPop* - the Office for Population Control, ensuring *other* women were responsibly discharging their duties. Megan and I had not met for a couple of years but every time we did, she told me how much she really admired me when we were growing up, and how inspiring I was.

"Wonky!" she said in a mock-excited kind of way, "you look *absolutely* marvellous."

"Thank you, but it's Charlie now."

"Sorry. *Charlie*." She paused for thought. "I think of you and St. Granata's all the time."

"Do you now?"

"Yes. And," she added, leaning closer, "you know what?"

Here it comes.

"What?"

"I always *really* admired you growing up. Always smiling through your unhappiness. A real inspiration."

"I wasn't unhappy."

"You *looked* unhappy."

"Looks can be deceptive."

"All too true," she said, "but I meant what I said: Inspirational in a sort of tragic way, like you're the failure in the family, but who always looked on the bright side of everything."

"You're very kind," I said, long used to Megan's ways, "but it could have been much worse: I could have been born without tact or empathy, and be shallow, self-absorbed and hideously patronising."

"That's true too," she said with a smile, laying a hand on my arm, "we are so blessed you and I."

⁴ Offsets were classed as childbearing *avoidance* rather than *evasion* - a subtle, yet legal, distinction.

Did I tell you that I got a promotion at OffPop? 34K plus car and pension."

"That's a huge weight off my mind," I said.

She beamed.

"You are so *very* kind. Well, mustn't tarry. So long, Wonky."

"Charlie."

"Right. Charlie. Inspirational."

And she walked off up the corridor. It would have been easy to dislike her intensely, but I actually felt nothing for her at all.

Billy DeFroid was the next person of note to walk through the doors. He hugged me warmly, told me I was looking about the best he'd ever seen me and then looked around the entrance vestibule of the old building with a sense of nostalgia. Billy and I were responsible for the dried smear of banoffee pie still stuck to the face of St. Somnia on the ceiling frieze overhead, a reminder of a memorable food-fight back in '96. There was even the dent in the plasterwork where Donna Tricket, intent on breaking the ground floor lap record on roller skates, had come a cropper due to some recklessly spilt Heinz spaghetti hoops by the kitchens.

"So what's this about you joining Prudential Winter Life?" he asked with, I think, a sense of friendly derision.

"Anything to get me out of this dump," I replied, "but, it's not like I can *only* sell Hibernational Cover with optional Redeployment and Mandatory Transplant payments, but whole life insurance, term, Dental, Fire and auto - and not to mention frost damage. What do you think?"

"I can hardly contain my indifference."

"I feel the same way, but, well, y'know, Morphenox."

I would be expected to work the first ten years at minimum wage, but it would be worth it. Not for the job, of course, which was dull as meltwater, but for the specific perk that went with it:

Prudential would transfer my rights to Morphenox across from St. Granata's without interruption. I could, quite literally, sleep easy. Despite the strict contractual obligations, lack of job mobility and freedom of choices that it entailed, the career move would be a no-brainer. I could finally get away from here with Hibernational Privileges undiminished.

"Has Ed Dweezle arrived?" asked Billy.

"I thought you knew. He walked last winter."

He thought about this for a moment and then shrugged. It wasn't unexpected.

"That's annoying; he still has my Dire Straits album. Can't be helped. I'll see you inside."

Lucy Knapp arrived half an hour later. We'd seen each other daily for eighteen years until she left to go to HiberTech Training College. Friendships ebbed and flowed in the Pool, but Lucy and I had always been close. In the six years since she'd left we'd spoken at least once a month.

"Hey," I said, and we tapped fists together, one on top of another, a sort of secret handshake from way back I-don't-know-when.

"Hey," she said, "how's it going? Prudential job confirmed yet?"

"HR are finessing the paperwork as we speak. How's married life treating you?"

"We called it off."

This was not unusual. Lucy had been so almost-married we joked that she only really liked the *smell* of wedding cake. Despite that, she'd not been any slouch on the reproduction front. She'd always said she wanted to have at least two by the time she was twenty-three, and had, much to everyone's admiration. Pool, not keeper - this was duty, not family. She was taking her responsibilities seriously.

"I'm between partners at present," she said, "I *hate* an empty bed. Know anyone suitable?"

I paused for thought. If previous partners of Lucy were anything to go by, I would be looking for a pea-brained narcissist with a trust fund. There weren't that many in Swansea, and I think

she'd been through them all.

"Now you've had your two," I said, "why not settle down with someone second tier?"

She gave me a friendly grimace.

"Stop trying to look after me, Charlie."

"Someone has to. Did you hear that Ed Dweezle danced the Night Fandango⁵?"

"Yeah," said Lucy, "I heard."

Dweezle always had trouble keeping weight on. We used to sneak him part of our food to help him out. I don't know how he'd lasted three winters on his own once out of St. Granata's, but it must have been expensive. On his fourth winter he'd entered the Hib too light and ran out of reserves three weeks short of Springrise. He'd Nightwalked and been redeployed as a street-sweeper somewhere up North, then parted out eight months later. HiberTech was the company that made Morphenox, redeployed Nightwalkers and then supervised the transplant potential of each. Their Nightwalker policy was neatly - some said perfectly - vertically integrated. They had a slogan:

Everything of use but the yawn.TM

Like me and Lucy, Dweezle had stayed the full eighteen years at St. Granata's. We were known affectionately as 'The Remaindered' and shared tears, mealtimes, baths, underwear, lice, blame, scratch cards - everything.

I walked with Lucy from the lobby to the Great Hall.

"I'm always uneasy about Pool reunions," she said, "on the whole the experience was good, but I didn't like everyone."

"Rough with the smooth," I said.

⁵ Slang for 'Became a nightwalker'. Usual terms were Husks, cabbages, Vacants or deadheads. Revenant was the most polite term, but technically speaking they were in a 'Pseudosentient Mobile Vegetative State'.

"Shits with the saints."

We mingled in the crowd and shook hands, hugged or nodded to the other poolers, strictly according to a sliding scale of respect and affection. Williams, Walter, Keilly, Neal, other Walter, Williams and McMullen were all there and I greeted them warmly. I thought I should say something to Gary Findlay but he turned away on the pretext of more beer from the cooler as soon as he saw me. He and I hadn't exchanged a word since we were twelve, the day his bullying stopped, the day I bit off his ear.⁶

Older ex-residents whom I didn't recognise were mingling freely with the rest of us, as the current residents did with us. Anyone who spent time at the Pool shared a bond, kind of like family. Actually, given the circumstances at the Sisterhood, many of us actually *were* family. Even without the gatecrashers there were at least five hundred people in the room, and sometimes the babble of conversation made it difficult to hear.

Lucy walked over to pay her respects to the Senior Sisters who were all sitting on the stage like seven duchesses, holding court. They were giggling foolishly at some small joke, their usual austerity ameliorated by the triple jollities of occasion, food, and for those not with child, the cheapest sherry that money can buy.

"Our very own Lucy Knapp," said Sister Placentia as we approached, embracing Lucy but ignoring me as one would a stick of familiar furniture, "tell me your news."

Lucy politely explained to them about her induction into HiberTech's Fast Track Management Scheme whilst I stood to one side. Despite the often erratic levels of care, most of the sisters were kind of okay. Without them, I'd have been nothing - infants with lesser conditions than mine were routinely left underweight heading into their first winter. There were worse pools than this one.

"*Fascinating, dear,*" said Sister Placentia once Lucy had concluded a potted history of what

⁶ It tasted salty if you're interested, and detached surprisingly easily.

she'd been up to, "and what chance you could wangle us a KEN to assist in the kitchens?"

"Next year's model might be an improvement," said Lucy in a guarded tone, "I'll see what I can do then."

A KEN or a DEB were the default names given to redeployed nightwalkers. With their cannibalistic tendencies wiped and the tattered remnants of their mind ingeniously rewired, they could do simple chores. Too simple, some said, to be useful domestically. The St Granata's over in Port Talbot had a KEN that could wash up⁷, but mostly they were used for strictly repetitive tasks in retail and agriculture. I heard of one who could operate a forklift and another who could add columns of figures, but I didn't know if it was true or not.

"How's it going, Wonk?" came a voice in my ear so suddenly I jumped. It was Sister Zygotia, a particular favourite of mine, despite - or perhaps because of - her eccentricity. She had a fondness for peanut butter and anchovies, used to nail her bedroom door shut during the winter 'to guard against Wintervolk', then insist that puddings be randomly laced with curry powder to: 'better prepare us for life's inevitable disappointments.'

"So-so," I said, "the council have agreed to our land tax exemption in theory, but I think it would be wise to invest in a new minibus. The budget for next year is a little tight but we should be all right, so long as the offset payments aren't reduced and we eat meat only once a week."

"Good, good," she said in a distracted fashion, then put her hand on my shoulder and steered me to a corner of the hall.

"Look, I don't want to be the bearer of bad news and all," she said, "but well, I am. You should know that Mother Fallopia got wind of your application to the Prudential, and well, she had words with their induction officer. Your application was ... rescinded."

I took a moment to digest this.

⁷ But only plates, saucers, pots, pans and cutlery. Cups, jugs and tankards were a complication too far.

"I hate that woman."

"Yes, I thought you might say that. But through your anger take note that she is swapping popularity for the good of the Sisterhood."

I had to admit I wasn't surprised, but it didn't feel good. Frustration has a smell of its own, like hot toffee. I looked at Sister Zygotia who said she was really sorry and I told her it was fine, really, and I was then relieved to be called away in order to help deal with Sister Contractia, who was taking her door bouncer duties a little more enthusiastically than anyone thought necessary.

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