

Being Bugged

By Jon Andriessen

It's usually quite busy at this time of the evening, but today, just when I need a little human camouflage there's just me, the guy behind the bar and a young couple on the table next to the toilets. They'll have to do.

I order a drink and stand back looking around for a seat, conscious of how I'd normally find the furthest remote corner and then I check myself again. I'm not here for my privacy - I'm here to intrude on someone else's.

So like some wannabe gumshoe on his first day at work I make my seemingly surreptitious way to the table next to the table next to the toilets and sit down. With my back to the marks I begin extracting objects from my pockets and shuffling them about while trying to be normal, so normal it hurts. Just in time, I stop myself from whistling out loud – like that's normal - in some absurd postmanlike attempt to justify this conceit, but it's not normal. Instead I unfold a newspaper and find I'm unable to concentrate on the words, so I look at the pictures waiting for them to speak. This is normal, isn't it?

In my mind I'm deep undercover, I've infiltrated a Weatherspoon's pub so expertly and seamlessly I could be a regular. Settled in, I wait for them to speak...

"Excuse me," she says and taps my shoulder. "Didn't you go to school with my sister?"

This is not the way it's supposed to go. I suddenly realise that Bugged have given me no covert training techniques, nothing do deal with the situation before me and in panic I instantly revert to the tried and trusted maxim of denial.

"Umm... n..." I start to say as she interrupts.

"It's Jon, isn't it? Your hair's different, but apart from that you haven't changed a bit." She smiles and I'm beaten.

I turn around and instantly recognise the face of the sister of the girl I'd been at school with, as well as the guy she's with, but can't put a name to it - turns out he knows me too. I'm thinking I should have gone to another town, somewhere a little more anonymous. Them's the breaks.

So we all talk and she tells me her sister's doing well and I pretend to care. Then she turns on me and my life, wonders what I'm up to and what am I doing here all on my own, so I tell her.

I explain how, along with hundreds of other writers, I'm sneaking around, eavesdropping on unsuspecting muses in the vain hope of uncovering something unique, excellent and true. I'm not sure she gets it at first, so I say something about art and understanding the human condition in all its wonderful banality and absurdism. She's still not getting it.

I decide there's little point carrying on this discussion and I do really need to find some material. It's not going to happen here.

As I get up and leave I see a woman sat on a nearby table with her back to us, just within hearing distance, scribbling in a notepad. As I walk passed her I realize I'm not writing this story and never have been, she just made me think I was.

And he left.

Poem

By Jan Arnold

Words float by on the summer breeze
And I catch them like butterflies,
Netting them as they fly
I am a dropper of eaves, breeding perversity
Secretly listening to the water's flow
And the voices of the unknown.
In the office, I am the spy,
The spider in the corner,
Drawing the words of others
Into my secret web of iniquity
Ready to pounce on an exclamation
Or an interjection
As if my life depended upon it.

a mantle piece

By Bob Hill

- With certain men I'd like to sit them on the mantle piece so that I can stand back and admire them. But there's nothing sexual in it...
-
- I know what you mean – but I can't do that. I always want to shrink them down to just the right size so they'll fit into a glass jar; then I can keep them in my pocket.
-
- How about their voice: does it stay the same or go all squeaky?
-
- Oh, definitely squeaky.
-
- Fair point. Otherwise it'd go against the laws of nature.

At the Gates of Sagrada Familia

By Alison J. Littlewood

Gaudi's creation rises, stark and improbable, into the sky. His cathedral's vast spires probe the Barcelona skyline, at once homage and proclamation and prayer and a scream. Faces grow from the walls, emerging or sinking, contorted in agony or bliss.

A story, written upon its walls: the birth of a God. And his death.

Tourists flock, heads tilted back, mouths open. Cameras clutched in their hands. Occasionally they press the shutter, try to frame what is, in truth, unframable.

Pillars writhe. Fissures open like mouths. Its form is organic, sensuous. Tormented. There is abandon here, and despair, and hope: one man's vision of his soul.

The towers wait. Stone drips.

A woman steps off a coach and turns to her friend.

"So that's a church, right?" she says.

There is a long pause.

"Yeah," her friend says.

"That's a church."

MacAdam Takes to the Road

By Andrew Phillip

Thirteen miles to empty and no petrol in sight,
but MacAdam must keep driving, past
new builds halted by recession,
office walls opened to the wind,
wisps of insulation tumbleweeding the highway,
mothballed factories on the edge of town,
scrapyard heaps of rusting bodywork,
old freight lines taken out of service,
hogweed crowding the wounded horizon
though he knows he soon will shiver
to a stop and leave himself stranded
in this edgeland chill, dreaming of everything
made fresh, made whole, fulfilled.

They have yellow sheets.

By Fran Martel

Yellow sheets ... primrose, or brighter – canary, even. Why do they make me wince?
Like sunshine bleeding through curtains in a cancer ward: inappropriately jolly.

They're not even ironed. Mum always ironed everything; warm singey smell; crisp creases; starched collars; and neatly folded underwear.

It all changed. The Seventies swept in. Dad got sick; Mum went to work; and she didn't have time to iron – or time for anything. Aunty Sue gave us new sheets: buttercup yellow poly-cotton *easy care*. 'Here, hold one end,' Mum would say. She'd hold the other and we'd give a quick tug, flick and shake out the creases as we folded each sheet. The washing machine was always churning: Dad's sheets.

When I left home I worried about Mum: lifting Dad; burglars pretending to be nurses; cleaning the gutters.

I never imagined her crumpled sheets

BUTTERED SCONES

By Bosey Manumba

'You want butter?
They've only given us one butter;
shall I fetch another butter
or would you prefer Flora?'

Two old ladies out in the sun.
Sisters. Friends?
A squeaky, slobbery voice
asking questions
with mute replies.
Flip-flops, baggy trousers, baggy tops.
'They never give you enough butter here. Oops ...'
and a dive into the baggy top,
a pulling out and down,
a view of breasts,
firmer than imagined,
in a well-filled see-through bra,
flicking crumbs from a deep cleavage.
'I've dropped my scone.'

then a cackle of a laugh
as she sees me watching.
'I've dropped my scone.'
and fingers search deep under concealed curves
'It's 'cos there isn't enough butter, love.'