

The Gate

For Hugh Epstein, without whom, nothing.

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My eyes are useless, for they render back only the image of the known.
Henry Miller - *Tropic of Capricorn*



Sunday night, a few hours after I saw her, I lay in the tent feeling it all slip away from me. I was stoned of course, and I saw that there was nothing left of it. It had been a slog of survival management. A defensive wall had enveloped me from the beginning, a tornado wind-wall if you like, and through it I could not hear the thanks, nor feel any regard, nor imagine that anyone had spared me a thought; least of all her. You see the blonde in blue and aviator shades looking at you. You shake the hand of the security chief and share an honest word, you shake the hand of every steward you can find and you leave the gate on your own to drink beer alone and conjure up a dream you cannot share; one that seems so predictable and familiar. You are sleeping close enough to people you can hear them turn in the night, but you are a million miles away from them; dope or no dope. In the morning I knew I would have to pack up and get down to Red Gate bus station. It was raining. There would be 25,000 people trying to get out, on any coach, at Red Gate. The site was trashed. It was the third bad year in a row. There was mud everywhere; on all my clothes, inside my boots. I could feel the airbed slowly going down. I wouldn't be taking it back with me.

On the plus side I was stoned, and would be for some time to come. I had enough malt whisky left to fuel my escape, two grand on a credit card and sufficient cash to get me back to London from anywhere in the West Country. My biggest worry was the walk to Red Gate. I was guessing it would take around 45 minutes and I was afraid of breaking an ankle or passing out en route. As I lay there listening to the rain batter the tent I regurgitated the snapshots of her body; the teeth, the breasts, the calves, her fingers running over the scar tissue below her knee. Each picture began to fade. All this is nothing, I told myself. I was too exhausted to review the usual details: Her as a woman, me as a gimp; she beautiful and resourceful, me ugly and helpless. It was pointless, that old routine. I decided to get on with it: Give myself over to the sadness and drink a nice cup of shut the fuck up.

I had arrived just after midday on Monday, driven down Blue Route and dropped near Ped Gate Bravo. It took less than an hour to register and set the tent up. By mid-afternoon I was sitting inside a big frame tent nearby drinking tea with the host and smoking the grass I had just bought with a third of my money. It was dry, fine and powdery, small crystals with a scattering of anaemic looking buds. It was my first smoke in many months. The tea tasted good. Getting back to crew camping was a somewhat testing.

Everything was going my way. I could hardly believe it. The shift pattern was Thursday 2-10pm, Friday 10-6am and Sunday 6-2pm. I figured that to be lucky, for many reasons which I won't bore you with.

Nuts were catering in the marquee again this year - the best food and drink on the whole site. One bank of the flushing toilets was open. The sun was shining. I smoked another joint outside my tent and chatted to a passing Scouser who looked a lot like an Irishman I once knew - similar mannerisms too. I took photos and later that evening sallied down the main drag to the Stone Circle.

The sun had set in a pink sky and a sickle moon appeared over nebulous, striated clouds. All the crews came out in force. They were mostly youngsters eager to make the best of it, and some newcomers seemed shocked at how crazy it was already going. These are the best days, the early days, with the playpen ours alone and a common bond and knowledge. I stopped at one of the tree branch benches outside The Tiny Tea Tent for a rest. A middle-aged woman with dyed-blond hair was sitting at the end of the seat, near the serving area. She was dressed like an actress who had hit her heyday in low-budget Seventies movies, although I had trouble making her out against the backdrop of candlelight.

"Do you know how much a herbal tea costs?" she asked. I noticed that she was drinking from a mug.

"I think it's about one-fifty/two pounds."

"Not here; I mean generally."

"Oh, outside? I'm not sure. I suppose Starbucks would charge more. Maybe two pounds. Most places in London would charge that."

"It's about right here then."

"I suppose so."

I gathered myself up.

"What is it that you do here - do you mind me asking?"

"No, not at all. I work backstage at Jazz World. It's an admin role you could say. I help people; help the bands. I also look out for problems."

"Have you been doing that for long?"

"Many years now. I live in the Canary Islands and come over once a year for Glastonbury and to see family. What do you do?"

"I'll be working one of the pedestrian gates. I've been doing it for a while. I love it. I love the people and the work. I find that every year gets better for me. It's an important part of my life now. A major part of my life."

She leaned forward, said softly: "Look, there's a sky lantern..."

I looked up and saw an orange smudge high in the night sky drifting north.

"They're beautiful aren't they?" she said.

"Yes."

We sat in silence for some time. I took a slug of water from the bottle and a rollie from the tin.

"What is it...that you do...in the real world?"

"I'm a writer. I write for travel magazines - for people coming to the Canary Islands."

"I do a bit of writing myself. For about 20 years now. I've never been published."

"What I do for a living is not serious. It's quite superficial really."

Silence again. We watched the passers-by. I stubbed the cigarette out in my portable ashtray and stood up.

"Well, I'd better get on. I hope you have a good festival. Take care of yourself."

"You too."

The Greenfields were pitch dark, but I left my torch in the butt pack. About 50 people were gathered around a fire at the Stone Circle. Music was coming from somewhere; drums; and the circle of bodies hummed with drunken, high conversation; all of them bathed in an orange glow - orange faces, orange bodies, one or two people moving with the music; outsiders like me standing in a ring with the stones. To one side a few people were lighting a sky lantern. I observed the faces around the fire

for a while as outsiders do - looking for an opening but not really wanting one. I gazed on the aspect to learn and give witness. You travel through time in this way. And as it was, a better place to die than any I can think of.

Tuesday morning I showered and brushed my teeth. I walked down the marquee for a meal and made a bee line for the Nuts end - heading for the outside café that served salads, vegetarian breakfasts and the best filter coffee on site. It was pretty much the same rig-up as 2005. They had tables at the front of the wagon covered with open-sided canvas and camouflage netting. It was a good place to smoke, relax, meet people and, as I mentioned before, the food was superb.

The main marquee was impressively big. You could seat maybe two, three, four hundred people in there. There was a rip-off joint at one end, swarming with flies and selling shite, and the main Nuts at the other. Nuts interior served hot dinners - good ones too - and they had a small bar dealing draft beer and shorts for reasonable prices. The shit joint was stocking tiny cans of Stella for £2.00. Nuts were knocking out big pint skiffs of lager and cider for £2.50 a pop. Their Gin and Tonic was excellent - ice, fresh lemon (probably organic, unwaxed) and good Gin for £2.00. I gave their people every courtesy, praising the food and service frequently. Apart from one pie from the Square Pie Company down the hill I ate at Nuts exclusively. I felt great and lost half a stone in seven days.

I can't remember, exactly, when I started to look for her face. Maybe it was from the beginning, unconsciously, when I walked in to registration at Bravo. I found that when I walked into the marquee I was scanning, scanning. I did have an excuse: I could have been looking for all sorts of people - people I have worked with over the last six years - but I was also looking for her. Not all of the time, but at many key moments. I thought she would be at that evening's briefings. I figured that if I was going to lay my eyes on her it would most likely be then. Monday was a probably write-off. Knowing her as I did I calculated she would get here today, Tuesday, or even Wednesday. But she would be a Supervisor or more likely a Team Leader, so I expected to see her that evening at seven. I had no plans to talk to her you understand. It would

be enough, for me, just to see her. It was as much as I could hope for.

As I walked into the marquee, it must have been about 9am, my eyes fell on another woman I had met at The Green Man Festival in 2006. She recognised me too.

I had camped near her at The Green Man and later worked with her at the Folkey Dokey stage. She was a strange bird; not the sort for festivals you would think; insofar as you can say that about anyone. She seemed a little cold and uptight to me from the off. Her husband struck me as a snide one too. My seminal moment, as far as she was concerned in my view, came late one night when she had loudly told a young couple to stop talking in their tent because it was bothering her sleep. I was stoned and enjoying the conversation and I half thought to jump out of the tent and tell *her* to shut up. Later, on shift, we talked. It was never far from my mind that she regarded me as a weasel of some kind, tent stinking of skunk as it did, but I gave her every break and regard. After all, maybe it was a hallucination. We had got talking about Glastonbury and I had gone off on one - the usual thing. She slowed, stopped, and looked at me sincerely...

"Is it really that important to you?"

"It's everything to me."

Now here she was; her first Glastonbury. I breezily asked in passing what she thought. For a moment she looked like a little girl - so embarrassed she averted her gaze...

"It's so big." And her voice broke on the word *big*.

I spent the day wandering around, for hours, taking photos, talking to people occasionally. I got back to the tent to prepare for the evening. Preparation consisted mostly of getting stoned and rolling as many joints as I could before boredom overcame me. My initial plan was to roll a round dozen, but I soon realised that some finesse was called for.

I rolled six normal joints with the grass I had scored the previous day and put them in a 99-pence plastic beaker I had bought from Woolworth's to initially hold whisky. I had two reefer tubes - plastic tubes with lids essentially - that I had bought in Amsterdam. These I reserved for what I thought would be two strong joints - to be produced at strategic moments in the evening. I then calculated that the proper

thing to do would be to roll one very big and possibly powerful joint. I had some super size papers with me and I deployed three of them for this final act. It wasn't easy. I put two cigarettes in and lost track of how much grass, but by this time I was thinking 'fuck it' - and said so aloud in the tent. Getting the rocket together was problematic and it required extensive repairs. It just fit, at an angle, in the beaker.

Then I went down the hill to visit the three amigos and see what else I could do for that night's party. Not a lot, as it turned out.

I had known these guys, tenuously, for about two years. They didn't work many festivals, but when they did they did it in amazing style. There seemed to be around a dozen people camped at the Alamo - in a big ring of tents. At the back was the main residence. This was truly remarkable; it had bedrooms, a lounge and a chill-out area. There was a kitchen with a range, a big table, three fridges and god knows what else. The courtyard was reached via a gatehouse which they had built from 4-inch wooden poles. In the center of the courtyard was a fire with a jury-rigged sofa - again made of wood. Opposite was a simple but elegant three-sided tipi in pale taupe held up with painted wooden poles, with one side open, facing the fire. Scattered around were a dozen or so folding chairs. They had shipped all this stuff down and had set it up Saturday night. There was the chief amigo, the quiet amigo, and the smart amigo. As I say, there were various other people camped there - three boys, a daughter in her thirties and several guests. Collectively, some resident guests included, I think we had all been smoking dope for at least 200 years.

The Chief Amigo handed me an ice-cold Stella. There was the usual hiatus that smokers endure: A sort of 'what do we do now factor' of steady anticipation. Then the Chief began coordinating in his deadpan, deliberate, Midlands intonation. Everything that happened around him...seemed to unfold to his own, slow tempo. For various reasons he had always seemed a mystery to me; a contradiction of sorts: Not least a very fit and highly organised stoner. I think he had been doing Glasto every year since the early Eighties.

I put a couple of tables together and filled bottles with water. I assembled the barbeques and ran a few chores. There were big paella pans for the curries - big enough for the kids to use as sledges in the

winter - and boxes of food ready for chopping, slicing and blending. More people arrived and got wrapped up in the work: Curries, chaat, naan, samozas - for 50.

Just before seven I went back to crew camping for the Team Leader briefing. I got to the marquee directly from the Alamo. She wasn't there. I hunkered down near the edge of the central tables and greeted a Geordie I had known since last year - since Womad and The Green Man. He was running at a rate of about nine or ten festivals a year, maybe more...

He smiled as he sat next to me. "Sit here and try to look interested I suppose."

Two veteran supervisors were looking over at me and laughing at the sunburn on my neck.

"Where did you get that from?!" One of them shouted.

"I've got a special marker pen." I hadn't realised how cooked I was.

At first we couldn't hear much. There were a couple of hundred other people around us and a lot of them were gabbing. A few of us heckled the speakers and we broke up into small groups outside. It had already been raining - hard - but not now.

There would be 13 different types of ticket this year. Holograms as usual, but with photos on them for the first time. Many types of wristbands. Gates were set to open tomorrow at 10am - and people arriving en masse. With more rain the site would start to get chewed up. It had the potential to be quite bad; but at least I had plenty of blow and whisky. If something nasty happened I wouldn't need to face it directly. And I had all day tomorrow to kick back and watch the influx; all day to fix a slot to recce the gate. Pedestrian Gate Delta. Ped Gate D. Forty-five Stewards and 5 Gate Organisers. I would be the Team Leader. Why not? Try not to think about it. Move on. Many hours between now and Thursday 2pm.

I loaded up on essentials and headed back down to the Alamo.

I reflect now and I can sense I was on autopilot. Exit that track through the hedge, not stewarded yet, and down past the first check point with blue-suited security; past the trickle of people coming through Bravo; then hook left at the junction and head into Family Camping. Easy walk: All downhill and a good view of the site: A view

I know so well now, although it's never in my dreams. Clear skies, absence of sweat, of discomfort. I execute the manoeuvre. Check pockets for card wallet and wads of cash. All in good order. At no stage do I stop and wonder about being there. Not once do I cast for a memory, many mad ones too, of this place. It was as if it didn't exist; as if there was no connection or continuity between the years. I knew only secretly, as I now know openly, that the time here would be a flat path through a brown year. The crucial symptom would be the lack of any severe intoxication. Given that I hadn't had a smoke in a long time it was obvious that there would be a bit of wanking going on. But on the other hand I couldn't anticipate any mind-blowing episodes - not like the two long walks; not another hair-raising space cake from catering or the girl who danced up to me in the dark as I had almost made it back and sang *The Wrong Kind Of Man* in my face and was dragged away by a bloke who could see I was wasted - even in pitch night - and then me wondering if it had actually happened...and then wondering if I had in fact met some friends from West London and they had tried to talk to me - and I had hallucinated the singing girl. Nothing like that. The grass wasn't that strong. I could drink only so much whisky. There was just a slim chance of being able to cover enough ground over the next few days to connect with some serious gear - mushrooms ideally. Seven or eight hash truffles might make the nut. A fair whack of dough but it could work. Timing would be crucial. The shift pattern ran the usual 3x8-hour sessions (read 9 hour sessions) with 24 hours off in between each one. Of course, I felt that right now would be the best time to go for it, but knew my only chance of obtaining the raw materials would be from Wednesday and Thursday onwards - when the hawkers appeared. The Stone Circle, on the other side of the site, would be an interesting and reliable market situation, but only if the weather held - and there was no fucking hope of that.

I got down to the fortress, saw a few of Whisky's people, serious looking crusties, lounging around next door. A big set-up they had, but the Alamo beat them on every angle. I met the Chief Amigo and asked him how they had coped with the heavy burst of rain that had struck when I had been at the briefing.

"Oh, we just went inside." And then; "Have you got any joints already rolled?"

"Yeah."

"Shall we get one going then?"

We had a smoke. There must have been about 15 people gathered in the courtyard at this stage; around eight. All the meat and vegetables had been prepared: Everything was ready. Dareios, a principal guest and Early Shift Team Leader, was mixing drinks - Brown Fists (in honour of Brown Friday in 2005 when much of the site flooded). The main ingredient was a big dose of Vodka. I think we had a gallon or two, maybe more. A fair-sized skiff got passed my way and Dareios handed me a straw with tiny chocolate pellets inside. The Chief Amigo was busy but spared the time to say; "The secret of the evening will be pacing yourself."

I sat on the sofa and talked to people I knew only from the boards. Fatboy was there; looking dapper in his Chinos and casual shoes. Storm was there. Her loud London patter surprised me. After a couple of minutes a tent near the tipi opened and a young woman's round face appeared. She had obviously been sleeping. She looked steadily at me for a moment, joined the people round the fire, grabbed the amigos' tray and started to roll a joint. She had tats, wore glasses and didn't say much - ever probably.

The night unravelled. The amigos fired up the cookers and began the process. More people arrived - some in fancy dress, Brown Fists were served, joints were smoked, the barbeque for the Thai curry collapsed on the ground, but no food was lost. Dareios and his partner, Michael, changed into Lycra jump suits. A few of us helped with the stirring. The heat from the cookers was fierce and you had to keep moving the food to avoid problems. It was busy work and not so easy when you were toasted. There was a tendency to get carried away and lose track of time. I had played this game the year before at Womad and knew the score. It was a performance. We worked in shifts and when the curries had cooked rice and water were added. The Chief covered the big pans with foil and put them on the ground to let the rice steam cook.

There was a light rain. It didn't bother me. I went for the vegetarian curry and had two helpings. It was excellent. I had to take it easy at this stage. The booze and the grass were getting on top of me. I took photos and talked cameras with the Geordie supervisor from the briefing.

Some danced around the chairs circling the fire, Dareios lit a sky lantern. Yas brought an iPod and connected it to the sound system. Heavy dance music played loud into the night. After a couple of hours the peak passed as people drifted away. I started to feel better and looked for a spot by the fire.

I lit the rocket. I took a few tokes and realised it wasn't working. I figured that it must have been taking on air. A blow. I decided the best thing to do was break it up into two or three joints. I put it back in the beaker for later and lit the last strong joint from one of the reefer tubes.

After a while I found myself sitting on a comfortable chair - complete with beer holder. The Chief's daughter sat next to me on the sofa. She had come off shift late and tidied herself up: Blonde; black knitted lattice sweater over a low cut black top; black tights; black Wellingtons; a floppy black hat with the peak at a playful angle. She sported a little light lipstick and eyeliner. She wore a plain gold wedding ring and had a blush on her face from working outdoors. She looked radiant in front of the fire. I was slightly wasted and felt immediately that I would have trouble keeping up with her...

"I love fires. Their sooo nice aren't they?"

"Yeah I like them too. I could watch them for hours."

"Are you comfortable? Would you like to sit here next to me?"

"Sure." I moved from the chair to the sofa. "This is great."

"You were at the Green Man weren't you?"

"Yeah. But I don't remember you being there."

"I had so much fun. I thought it was wonderful."

"It was a good one. One of the best probably. Do you mind me asking: What is it that you do?"

"I'm a medical sales representative."

"The same as Dareios?"

"That's how I met Dareios. I introduced him to John and that's how he got involved with festivals. What do you do?"

"I work in local government. It's OK. I live and work in the same

town. It's a quiet office and a nice area. Pretty undemanding job...I keep my head down...It pays the rent."

"What do you do in the office?"

"Web design stuff. I help look after the web site. I'm not a techie though; I'm not an IT type. My background is in the Arts."

"Whereabouts do you live?"

"Twickenham in West London. I live with my parents. I can't afford to get a place of my own."

"That's alright."

"How about you?"

"Where do I live?"

"Yep."

"Lancashire."

"Listen, I have to mention this: I was wondering how old you are? I didn't mean to pry - but the Chief has said a few times that you were 19."

She smiled. Big white teeth. "I'm 36. I've got my son with me. He's 11." She laughed. "You must have thought when you saw me 'God - *she's* had a hard life!'"

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything. You seem very respectable though; medical sales representative and all."

"Listen, I don't even smoke! You know, those buggers made me smoke a joint earlier. You should have seen me. I couldn't stop talking!"

She laughed again. I smiled and looked at the fire. On the sofa to her left was the girl who had popped her head out of the tent earlier and rolled the joint. She was curled up like a cat, staring into the flames. The Chief's daughter stroked her arm and asked her if she was OK. I moved back to the chair with the beer holder. I put my hat on and looked into the fire.

The amigos - the Chief, the quiet one and the smart one - were lying down on cushions in the open-sided tipi. There was some pissed and stoned old geezer crashed out with them. The Chief called me over and passed me a joint. A couple of young women turned up sporting trendy-looking spectacles. They looked exhausted, defeated. They had arrived late after travel problems. One of them I recognised from the boards. I

told her she had a distinctive face. She laughed nervously. The other, an aquiline blonde, sat next to me. I casually quizzed her about her life and we talked history - classical history as I remember. The conversation died a natural death. I got up and skirted the fire carefully over to the amigos. I asked the Chief if he wanted to break the rocket up on the tray.

"Light it up."

"I think it's fucked. I'm not sure it's working..."

The wrecked old geezer lifted his head from the oblivion and rasped...

"If it gets you stoned there nothing wrong with it!"

The amigos laughed. I lit the rocket again. I took a couple of tokes...then another. Momentarily I couldn't work the thing out. Something seemed wrong. It didn't feel like a normal joint. Then it dawned on me that the smoke going inside me was unusually rich and potent. I had to sit down again.

"Fuck me that's strong." I passed the joint over and retreated to the chair.

I sat there for I don't know how long. There was a pissed bird with dreads talking to a wasted Welsh bloke opposite me. I couldn't get the gist of the conversation but imagined she had mentioned me and the Welsh bloke had dissed me. *He is nothing!* I heard him say. He seemed to be losing it. I was gone; wrapped in the flames. I took a discrete photo of Dareios. He was sitting staring vacantly into the blaze. I decided it was time to leave. I stood up and walked across to the tipi. I lent down over the Amigos and put it on...

"Well...it's been a *lovely* evening."

Dareios, still by the fire, perked up: "Oh no, don't leave!"

The Chief got up.

"That was a hell of a joint. That was something to be *proud of*."

"It's been a good evening. It was a stonking meal."

"Drop by if you're passing again."

I walked back to crew camping - Tom's Field - and up the fire lane to my tent. I had a piss on the way. It must have been about two in the morning. When I got to the tent I pumped up the airbed and rolled another joint. There was a wetness in the air, a chill, a silence. Ambient

light from scattered floodlights lit the night and the whole valley seemed to resonate with the faint hum of generators and a distant beat of music. I stood now on the northern edge of a bowl of sound and luminescence in a landscape of silent darkness. In a few weeks it would be gone. It was a hallucination. So was I then.

The tent threw off the familiar scent of stale synthetics. I could hear nothing but the hum and the far off beat, not even a conversation in the distance. From the top of the hill I could see the whole site - including a light or two from the Stone Circle on the other side of the valley. I crawled inside the tent and took my clothes off. I took my briefs off but kept them wrapped around one leg in case of the need for a fast exit. I was high again - as high as I had been at any time that evening. I tried to have one off the wrist and fell into a semi-sleep. I slept well. After dawn the punters would start arriving. I had 36 hours to relax.

Wednesday broke with an overcast sky and intermittent rain. I blew my third meal voucher (we get five) on breakfast at Nuts exterior. I sat under the awning and smoked cigarettes with my filter coffee. I went back to the tent, rolled a couple of joints and sorted out the contents of my shoulder bag for a walkabout. I needed a blanket. I needed a container to put the grass in - a tin or something. At the moment it was stashed in a flimsy polythene bag.

I set off. It was past ten. There was now a steady and growing influx of punters coming in through the gates and tents were being pitched all over Big Ground, Row Mead and Home Ground - overlooking the main arena and the Pyramid Stage. The markets were opening and the bars were making their last preparations. I walked down to the main Joe Bananas stall and bought a second-hand blanket for £5. The nights were nearly always cold and I had long since gotten into the habit of sleeping on my side - wrapped around a substitute body. One blanket might make the nut, although I might need two.

I killed time down on the site until the bars opened and bought skiff of warm cider. I walked down to the Stone Circle - checking the shops and stalls along the way. The German masseuse was here again with her funky chair, the felt shop, the steam boat man and the falafel place strangely staffed by lookers - every one could have been a model. (They

sold cold Diet Coke at a reasonable price.) The gang of twee, middle-aged ladies were selling fruit smoothies again from their greengrocers in B Market. I had sheltered in their place in 2005 on the morning of Brown Friday, tipping gallons of water off their awning and watching the floor sink in the inundation.

In the Acoustic Field the Twelfth Tribe were still making final touches to The Common Ground Café. It was one of my favourite venues; a surprisingly solid and massive two-storey wooden building reminiscent of a Hoghead pub in the Nineties: So much so that many newcomers made the mistakes of a) assuming it was permanent and b) enquiring about the beer. The Tribe ran a strict no-alcohol policy. They went as far as meticulously plucking up all the cigarette butts in a 10-yard radius around the structure - throughout the 5 days. All the food was organic - and no bullshit there. Even the salt was naturally harvested, air-dried 'Celtic' sea salt. They served some meat, only chicken; killed reverentially no doubt. There was a selection of fresh fruit juices. I rated the Hibiscus Cooler, served with ice.

They made their own clothes - according to their code of modesty. The women wore long dresses. They all had long hair. The men sported beards and pony tails.

I called out to one of the men. He was a young bloke - late twenties, early thirties...

"When do you open?"

"Oh," he cast a glance at an older man nearby, "Not until later, about four or five. But if you need something now we may be able to help."

The older man had a word in his ear.

"No. I'm sorry, you'll have to come back later."

"No problem."

Wandering around. Trying to take photos of people on the sly. Stop off again at The Tiny Tea Tent. Make my way back to Tom's Field for some scrán and then set off for the gate. It was around 1pm.

It took about 40 minutes to walk to Ped Gate Delta, situated near some industrial-looking farm buildings on the western side of the site. On the wall to the north was Vehicle Gate 4a and a little further up, Vehicle Gate 5. To the south were Vehicle Gates 4, 3c and 3b. There were no other Ped Gates south of Delta. The nearest place you could

enter on foot was Ped Gate A on the north-western corner of the site. A bit of a hike along the perimeter. Ped Gate C sat on the other side of the site - diametrically opposite. Ped Gate B sat on the north-eastern corner.

Outside the fence were acres of car parks, West 20 to West 33, dissected by Orange Route - which led straight to the gate. Inside the gate there was camping and the Dance Tent and the Dance Area. The Pyramid Stage was a 20 minute walk to the left as you came through the fence - 20 minutes on firm ground that is. To the right, heading south, was the new Park Area under the aegis of Emily Eavis - the main man's daughter.

Traditionally the western side of the site was the youngster's side - dance, cinema, the Other Stage. North was staff, police, medical, the farm, helipads, the radio station, the admin. East was for the older people and families: Acoustic, Theatre, Jazz World, Cabaret, Circus. South was the Greenfields and the Stone Circle, small stages like the Avalon and Croissant Neuf...and tipi fields. South was the heart of the festival. South was where you found the most serious crusties, the eco-fairs and healing fields, the campaigners and activists. And south was where you most readily found hash cakes and mushrooms and skunk and nitrous oxide and amyl nitrate and ketamine...etc etc.

Thus is the great demography. Two hundred and fifty thousand people, including 40,000 staff.

Katrina was running the first shift - as in 2005. She looked busy. I showed my pass to one of the stewards on the wide lane and explained I wanted to look around. I checked out all the positions and procedures. She wasn't there.

I went back to Tom's Field, stopping off at the flushing toilets on the way. At the marquee I had a meal and drank some beer. I took a beer down to the Oxbox - the portacabin HQ - and asked for a list of supervisors on my shift the next day. No list was available. I scanned the notice boards and earwiggled on a few conversations.

I decided to go back to the tent and rest. I walked up the fire lane to my biker's black Vango and found the ground around me rammed with tents. Some were overlapping mine now, squeezed into the smallest of spaces. It took careful footwork to manoeuvre myself to the front

entrance. I sat down inside, flaps open, pumped up the useless airbed, took my boots off and pulled out a joint. I tuned my walkman radio into the festival's station - WorthyFM - and smoked off the reefer. There was about an inch and a half left when I carefully stubbed it out. I zipped up the flaps and laid down.

I was stoned again, and it came at me pell-mell; the crisp air, the traffic broadcasts, the synthetic, memory-evoking smell of the nylon. I pulled off most of my clothes and began massaging my balls. Reassuring - that they were still there. Two DJs bleated the latest news. I vamped in my head, thinking of birds I knew, who I would like to fuck, but thinking of writing too - and life: An absurd life and world of forms that slips through one's fingers after each moment of coherency, moving on in strange associations. Soluble forms. Soluble fish. See the ground from a vampire's point of view. Glastonbury Wemptir. Two girls in The Man. I tell them the Swedish Chemist Joke deadpan and one of them cracks up. 'My friend is very impressionable. She's been through a lot.' I say 'Cheech and Chong.' I'm laughing now. What would they think? Hold up my hand against the inner. Hunter Thompson checking his veins. Hyper dimensional tent backdrop. I'm in my castle, or a domestic scene from *Das Boot*. Memories of thinking I was inside the Pyramid Stage as the Chemical Brothers played in 2000. What was that song, that reggae song? I'll never know. Reggae? No, it was serious dub. Not enough dub now. Radio needs more dub. Must text them. Get this commercial shit off the air. And dub from the guy with pink hair and the decks. I was underground - or there was an underground. Chai tea and a vibrating floor. And with a gorgeous bird; big legs; big nips - *apparently*. Segue into a domestic scene with her. Arms, legs unfolding. Tea in the morning and low voices.

What's the deal with being on the road now? Nutters on the move. Dick Shepherd will be storming around in his pick-up, chain smoking, bullshitting people where needed. I hear a chopper in the air, even through the headphones. It's all going down now. We are back in the Seventies. And the fabric moves so gently. Tiny glitter lights through soft gauze cotton with small impurities - flecks in the fabric. What would they think - Ian, James - seeing me like this, after all these years? Lost I was. Hand in the air over me. Air moving through the pores.

Pores bringing in specks of glitter light; so small. Free now.

Crack on. I decided to crack one off. I went into silent mode, complete with pillenwerfers. After 5 minutes of stroking my piece I put the headphones in again and carried on. The DJs played Shirley Bassey's latest hit. It was the first time I heard it and I thought it was brilliant. I carried on wanking, then listened to the radio a bit more, then wanked again. It was slow, drawn out. The music was getting to me. I wrote down the number they gave out on the station and sent them a text...

Keep up the sexy music guys - it helps me to wank in my tent.

I smoked the rest of the joint. A while later they read out the message on air, with some laughter, assuming it was from a 'young man who could have only just arrived and was already pleasuring himself.'

I carried on the good work and shot a silent wad on some toilet paper. I put the tissue in my rucksack - as a neat surprise for any Scally who might steal my stuff. A hangover, perhaps, from the old days. I slept.

I walked in the evening - staying mostly in the north. The site seemed full now; fires burned everywhere, thousands of flickering motes and the torrid aroma of smoke. Shouts, shouting you never witness on television, between the people overlooking the main arena in the north and people at the stone circle and Pennards in the south. One side calling the other. A roar like a train and more music now from the shops and bars raising the aural temperature. The army had arrived...but to me, everywhere, the spectacle was tempered by concerns: Changing times, commercial pressure, bad evolution, lack of spirit, bad weather on the way, mud due everywhere. I saw two vistas: On one side the old man with a job to do, on the other a wide-eyed virgin soaking up subconsciously a timeless and priceless panorama. Of celebration: Of joy and hope.

Later that night I found myself back in the marquee. Martin came over for a chat - the Geordie I met at the briefing and had known since last year. I had a lot of time for him. He was as solid as they come. A serviceman. Bullish, bald-headed.

We bought each other beers from the Nuts bar and talked about the line-up and when Shirley Bassey was likely to play. I talked about

Floyd and Zappa and may have even mentioned The Trees and Joni Mitchell. We discussed Sandy Denny and maybe Roy Harper. Martin talked about his favourite bands - especially Led Zeppelin. In the course of the conversation he mentioned *Kashmir* as being regarded, amongst the dilettantes, as their best song. I felt proud to be sitting with him and proud to be, in some senses, a little like him. We had both been working the circuit for years - although he had done so much more than me. We were both dug in - *professionals*, as the The Doctor would have said. Both in Boony hats, drinking beer on a sloping table on cow-pitted ground, with our butt packs and boots and camping gear on. I thought for a moment that we must have looked the part.

I only had three or four pints. I left him there, took a volumous piss, smoked a joint and drank some whisky back at the tent. I worried a while about the following day.

In 1989 I was 22. I was in the West Country on the Tuesday selling accountancy training manuals, driving under the heat of the day-star in my company car, chain smoking, listening to a mixture of Deep Purple, Kate Bush, Beethoven, Hawkwind, Genesis, Yes, Pink Floyd and a wide range of rare, bootlegged, deleted, British progressive psychedelic folk.

I bore a sense of deficiency within. My life was a wash-out, a wreck, on a supernatural scale. I was unlike anyone I knew, but only in the sense that the people around me certainly shared a sensitivity and wisdom that I could only guess at. I was ignorant at the core, which is to say ugly and useless. My private life was a kind of sewer of my own making - a sewer I retreated to because I was afraid of facing the world at ground level. After a while the stink sank into me. It had been this way for some time, perhaps all my life, but now I was becoming ominously sensitive of being something apart from the streams of my friend's lives. My friends...were everything. Together we had been to the moon and beyond. They had saved me from a life of isolation. We had lived together, slept, ate and drank together. We had heard the chimes at midnight. I had nothing before them. Now, with the passing of nearly every day, I could see them slipping away from me. As they advanced I stayed rooted to the spot. I watched them growing above

and beyond me. In a reverie in my room one night, probably talking to myself, a thought had occurred to me...

How can you have a meaningful conversation with anyone without ever having been with someone?

Work was a sham of course, and so was money, but I was fully in with the Machine. I was one of Maggie's boys, working the circuit with a tie, sports jacket and chinos. But by midnight I soared on wings of deliverance. Slowly I had begun to penetrate another world. Music helped. In my despair I was losing all sense of progression. The future sprang from a hidden source, and I was regaining my innocence. I found that the colour of innocence is black: The colour of the dilated pupils.

I drove around the limitrophe of the site. I saw youngsters stopped by the police on the roadside and had a chat out of my nearside window with an American woman sitting in a Mercedes who told me impassively that someone had just tried to rape her.

I was back in London that night gathering blankets, candles, torches and the like. The next day I left for the festival with what seems like a boot full of junk and a freewheeling Irish Loyalist called Ian Patterson.

We were on site, with the car, on Wednesday night. Our friend James turned up the next day. We established the camp, bought a hand-made chillum and from Thursday I gradually started to slip further away. I was a Glastonbury Virgin to perfection - stoned, stunned, disorientated, lost and tripping on the idea of my fate. I never got my bearings and was never far away from James or Ian when negotiating the site. The tents fell apart (I drove the car over one of them) and we had some stuff ripped off.

We met with people we knew; students, dealers, squatters. I saw Travellers and heard house/trance for the first time; which magnetised me. We watched Van Morrison in vehement sunshine and Suzanne Vega through the smoke of the fires. The pyramid stage was a dirty battleship grey. I took to the chillum Saturday evening and listened to the talk around us in the shadows with an expectation. Fogged nights laden with promissory notes...and for the remainder of my days. I was becoming the archetypal fool, whose living world gets turned upside down, inside out. In those fields a simoom seemed to blow and carry

me forwards into a haunted light and spirit-filled night. I was on the edge of the end of the rainbow. Only a complete clown can stumble there.

Monday morning I raced James back to Staines. The company car was trashed inside and the bodywork was covered in a thin patina of dust. Somebody, possibly me, had written 'Glastonbury Victim' in the dirt on the bonnet. I frequently topped a hundred on the way back. My face was peeling off. On return I gave James some of my dope and went home to sleep and feel like a failure. I fell apart over the next few months.

Years passed.

In the Nineties I watched the coverage and got caught up in the magic. People I worked with were going every year. I eventually cracked in 2000 and applied for a job as a litter picker - for free entry and food. I felt, rightly, that a job would give me a regular baseline - a mooring. I went in with a 'fuck you' attitude to being overwhelmed and I kept on the qui vive. Besides, I had put on five stones since '89 and stood about six foot in my boots, so I probably didn't look like an immediate pushover. I made an exhaustion-fuelled decision to leave on Monday morning and missed my last shift. I didn't get my deposit back. It didn't bother me at all.

In 2002 I started working as a steward - unpaid again, but with free entry, free food and the cachet of raising money for charity from the corporation. I worked a small farm gate outside the fence in the eastern caravan parks with a handful of stewards. I got to know some people, interesting people, and I finished my shifts.

The following year I worked on Ped Gate C. I felt that I did some of the best work in my life. I guessed they might offer me a supervisor's job at some stage, but I didn't want it. I reflected that maybe it was the best stewards who declined the promotion. It seemed that way to me at the time. Besides, I enjoyed shouting at people. I bellowed directions like a Beefeater - one that relishes his job. I worked the crowd a bit too. It all seemed out of character. I was stunned with my performance afterwards. It seemed unbelievable.

In 2004 I worked two shifts on Vehicle Gate 5 and one shift as a 'floater' on the Thursday. That day a supervisor due to work on Ped

Gate D had called in sick and they needed a replacement. I was landed with the job. They gave me a radio and I headed for the gate straight away. I found myself Team Leader in charge of 50 stewards.

2005 they put me back on Delta as a 'Steward Supervisor' - a sort of NCO role looking after the stewards. I met her then. She was working on the shift as a Gate Organiser - a regular supervisor, but in the organisational semi-chaos that usually reigns I ended up running the gate as Team Leader with her as Steward Supervisor organising the breaks and such. As the original Team Leader had pulled out it was never really clear who was supposed to be in charge. They sent a couple of replacements down at various stages, but she and I really ran the gate together over the three shifts.

I wanted the radio, and the stamp of the Team Leader job, on the last day. I had got to like it, and I went down to the Oxbox before the shift to ask for it, but they had given it to her. She ran the final shift. I backed her all the way.

It had rained Friday morning; the heaviest rain in 100 years. Some parts of the site were under three feet of water.

It was hard and I cried after that last session on Sunday, in my tent, on my own, and I cried again when Shannon Smy sang *I Am Dust* in the Avalon Field a few hours later. She had seemed incredible to me.

2006 was another fallow year for the festival. I was devastated. I worked Womad and The Green Man as Team Leader. She wasn't at either.

I woke up at about 10am, too late for a joint. After breakfast I wandered the northern end of the site and eventually made my way back to Tom's Field. It must have been about noon when I started hanging around the Oxbox. I got a list supervisors. Her name wasn't on it. I found out that one of the supers on the shift was the cousin of the shift leader (who sits in the Oxbox coordinating all the gates on the radio). No name. By 12.30 I had decided against waiting for a lift, picked up the rest of the paperwork and made my way down to Delta.

I was a good 45 minutes early. The ground all around the gate complex, and in many parts of the site now, was sodden and muddy with regular rain. I found a dry concrete slab to sit on behind the cage -

the covered entry point for first-time punter entries - and smoked a cigarette from the tin. I had rolled about 15 earlier that morning at breakfast. A few minutes to myself, incognito, in the crowd.

It was busy now; early afternoon on the Thursday. At any given moment hundreds of people were pouring through the turnstiles, having tickets checked, being wristbanded. Traffic went two ways, in and out. Many made more than one run from their car.

The main influx was in though. People walked through the fence, the 'super' fence, which was staffed by black-suited SIA-certified security - about ten of them at any given time. There were a couple of stewards on the fence too - to shout directions. Security conducted random drugs searches on the punters and, more importantly, checked many of the bags for glass bottles, banned on the site for good reason. They also dealt with, at this initial stage, obvious nutters, pissheads, Pikeys and Scallys.

From the fence gate new entries went to the right. They entered a covered marquee with eight lanes of ticket checking points with UV lights staffed by stewards. The stewards tore their ticket stub off, which was kept for auditing purposes, checked the hologram under the lights, checked the photo on the ticket, smiled and gave the ticket back to the punter with the instruction not to lose it. The punters then moved into a bigger marquee with long rows of trestle tables staffed by about 50 corporation wristbanders. The wristbanders looked at the ticket again, checked the punter's photo ID, pulled a fabric band out of cardboard box and sealed it to the punter's wrist using a cast-iron press. The punters then left the marquee and entered the cage (unless they had an exceptional wide load - a trolley, wheelbarrow etc - in which case they were directed down the wide load lane). The cage was split into two channels, each serviced by two turnstiles which electronically recorded entries. There was also a staffed gate for loads which wouldn't go through a turnstile (an exceptionally loaded person) with an electronic clicker to record entries. In an island, if you like, between the two channels, was a team of around 12 stewards handing out programs and pocket guides. When the punter left the cage they were in.

Re-entries went left at the fence, for the main turnstile complex of re-entry and exit lanes made up of long channels of barrier fencing. It was

out in the open and a bum rap if you had to work it in the rain (and more than 20 stewards would have to). Workers went this way too, and performers too lowly not to be chauffeured onto the site. Tickets were checked in these re-entry lanes again - with wristbands and passouts, except in some instances where workers had no wristbands or passouts - in the case of laminates or paperwork, for example. The exit lanes were over to the far left, where tickets and wristbands were checked *on exiting* before a small passout ticket was issued. A punter, to get back into the festival, needed a ticket minus stub (with hologram and photo), a properly attached wristband and a passout ticket (also with a hologram) that was issued on exit.

There were scores of variations, variables, permutations and exceptions. Children under 13, for example, did not need tickets, 13 to 15-year-olds had to have a Child Ticket with a photo of the responsible adult on it and could only enter with an adult, workers did not get programs, Easy Passout wristband bearers (like me) did not need a ticket or a passout, punters who were double-wristbanded did not get a passout on exit and didn't need one to re-enter, Sunday tickets did not have photos, neither did worker's tickets, Hospitality Ticket holders were supposed to enter the site through Vehicle Gate 4A, but could enter through another gate only if they could produce satisfactory photo ID, Mendip Council staff could enter with their ID. So could all the emergency services.

It's a fucker of a situation to find yourself in charge of, and as I sat there behind the gate, with hundreds of people milling around me, I found myself drawing from a deep well of temporary quiet. Did anyone else notice how miraculous a thing it was? Punters no doubt were blinded by the rush and hassle of *getting in*. Who stopped to look at the thing in its entirety? To wonder at it? Very few I feel. For a punter to even begin to appreciate the intensity of it they would do well to be high; and to be fair, many of them were.

I put the cigarette out in the portable ashtray and emptied the whole thing in a nearby bin. I walked up to the gate and through the wide lane - carefully, to avoid slipping on the muddy tracking, lowering my head instinctively as I passed the girl steward on the electronic clicker in the middle of the lane.

Alex was running the gate. She was leaning against the barrier fencing between the wristbanding tent and the cage where the programs were handed out. She was Oxfam Royalty - normally a Shift Leader or senior organiser. A fit, long-haired brunette, good looking, young, from the north, somewhere like Leeds. She had been my shift boss at The Green Man. On the Saturday night there had been trouble near the Folky Dokey stage when a security 4x4 went through one of my positions and a prick in the passenger seat had raised two fingers to a young female steward. I had gone ballistic and tore the house down. After catching up with the bozos and tearing a strip off their chief I had found myself surrounded, in quick succession, by different groups of shaved-headed SIA guys. They all looked the same and were coming on heavy. The security chief for the whole event came down to back his boys up - but so did Alex. She was a cool as a cucumber.

"How's it going?"

"You're early."

"I want to have a look around for a while."

"Did you get a lift down here?"

"No, I walked."

"I'm gonna try to get a lift back."

"I'm gonna wander around for a while and see how it's going. I'll see you in a bit."

I traipsed up to the fence through the mud. It wasn't so bad at the moment. The rain had stopped. I looked around, at a loose end, and walked back down through the marquees into the cage where stewards were handing out programs. I walked outside and took a look at the turnstiles, trying to get a grip on which one was for what.

I felt out of my depth, overwhelmed. I walked back to Alex, ready to take over. She gave me the radio and what seemed to be a half-crazed, scatter-brained briefing on the current situation. As always, there was a dangerous feeling of confusion, of the possibility of overlooking a crucial detail. She had notes from people, descriptions of punters who she had talked to and ID'd who would be coming back expecting entry without a ticket or identification. There was information about individual stewards, levels of supplies of passout tickets, programs and guides, the latest news on hospitality tickets, the latest policy on

pushchairs and what was happening with a bag someone had left in the cage. She ran through the spiel, fighting distraction, addle. There is a tendency after that amount of time on a gate to orate *through* people. The lights were on but no-one was home. I know from experience that she hardly believed it was over for her (and this was her last shift, as I remember). There was always a feeling that you couldn't leave quite yet, and that somehow you might not make it to that beer, or your bed, or whatever did it for you. I knew I would be the same in eight hours.

Seeing her off I noticed that the other supervisors had started to arrive. All blokes. Mostly young - obviously some professionals. One guy with dreads and an ominous grin. Another guy was older, about my age I guess. His name was Frank.

Thinking back now, I take some solace in how quickly I sized-up Frank, without any real conscious volition. It seems surprising to me that I am capable of making a good judgement, or a good decision, still believing, as I do, in my own essential lack of ability, or knowledge of the world. We were in the cage...

"Hi, I'm Chris."

"I'm Frank. Nice to meet you." He shook my hand and put down a small rucksack.

"Have you stewarded before?"

"No, this is the first time. Although I know someone that does it a lot and they've filled me in. Have you done this much?"

"A few times. I've worked this gate before."

"Listen,.. " (here he looked at me slightly wide-eyed, just a hint of incredulity) "...are we allowed to smoke whilst we are working? I can't get through this without the odd fag."

"I smoke, I just go to one side. Sometimes I take my tabard off. The best thing to do is probably wander outside and have one outside the fence."

"That's good."

"Have you been to Glastonbury before?"

"No, never."

"Well, do you..."

"I'm gonna have a wander around. Just see what's happening."

"Good idea."

He was a stocky bloke, gapped-toothed, close cropped hair, a look slightly of a young Charles Laughton or a bit-part player in a role in an 18th-century period drama - playing the town thug or the executioner. He had big, tear drop-shaped blue eyes, always wide open it seemed. As soon as he opened his mouth and spoke to me I knew that he was a geezer - the right material for this job, and maybe better than me. I knew it in my heart rather than my mind, which was already overloaded. It was the way he spoke so clearly, so strongly, with a due but guarded regard. He spoke to me as if I needed help, he spoke to everyone that way. I guessed instantly that he had been used to dealing with drunks (and clearly knew the sauce himself, but not badly). An old-style bouncer had told me once: *When you are dealing with a drunk person always talk to them as if they were a child of about 5 - it's the only way you can make them understand you.* I had a feeling that Frank had done quite a lot of this...and not just dealing with drunks - but the enraged, the hysterical, the idiotic, the prejudiced, the tearful and the hurt.

Christ knows, I give myself a pat on the back now for the way I moved so seamlessly, so naturally, and so quickly to the notion that he would be The Man, the sarge, on the shift. I realised that for the time being I needed this bloke at the front. But strictly speaking I needed him everywhere. He would be Steward Supervisor, and organise the breaks, not the other guy who had showed up. Instant promotion. He didn't know it yet though.

The last of the other supervisors left shortly after Alex, within a few minutes. That left myself and Frank. There was also Alastair, a dry and reliable trainee barrister with small, square glasses, Nigel, another young bloke - student probably, who had clearly been caning something the previous night going by the frown, Alan, same deal sans the frown, and Dep with the dreads and the worrying grin. I gave Frank the sign-out sheet for the current shift of stewards. Our crew had started to arrive. We only had about half an hour before shift change over and I wanted Frank with the sheets at the back of the cage for the switch. I figured that after that he could go where he wanted, guessing that he would gravitate to the front.

Delegation was big on my mind. I had five supervisors and divided the gate down to five areas - the front, with the SIA people, the first marquee with the UV checking lanes, the cage where the programs were being handed out, the turnstiles and the wide load lanes. I gave each super an area to check, told them to speak to the stewards there and get back to me on how many people they would need to cover the work. I already had a rough idea of numbers.

I knew the switch over was crucial - not least to get the poor bastards who had done their eight hours away without too much delay. Many of them had been standing in the rain and the mud and most of them now faced a 30-40 minute walk back to Tom's Field.

More stewards gathered around the back of the cage - pretty much the full contingent. Frank was signing them in. It had already gone 3pm and the other supers began to drift back with the numbers. Most of our shift had dumped their bags in the cage and had donned their vests - florescent orange with an Oxfam logo on a black rubberised plate on the right breast and a unique serial number on the left. (Supervisors wore the same design but with a yellow band around the bottom with the word SUPERVISOR printed on the back.) I got their attention and began shouting, very loudly...

"Hello! My name is Chris! I'm the Team Leader! Have any of you worked this gate before?!"

No acknowledgements.

I nodded reflexively. "Good."

"Frank here is going to be looking after you today!" (Glance at Frank. Little look of surprise on his face - or anticipation?). If you have any problems speak to him, or speak to me, or speak to your supervisor! We are going to move you into positions now! When you get there speak to the stewards there and find out what they are doing! And we are going to try to move you around during the day so you don't get too bored or don't have to spend too much time in the rain!

Pause. I breathe.

"Is everyone happy?!"

I look at them, look at their faces. Many of them look calm, eager, content. Many of them look as if they want to reassure me. Many of them look so well adjusted, so positive, so reconciled, that I feel

unnecessary.

"OK! We need 10 people..."

We got them out in batches.

There was a Gate Monitor on duty. Gate Monitors work for the corporation and do long hours - something like 5x12 hour shifts - paid. They are pros in the most part, who work the same gate year after year and keep a close eye on the staffing and the operation. Technically speaking I was in charge, whatever that meant, of everything, including the SIA people, the regular security and the corporation wristbanders. It doesn't work that way though. The person in charge is the one with the most moral authority, the strongest personality, the most flight time and most of all - the right answers...at any given time.

Sarah was Leah's sister. I had worked with Leah before in 2004 and 2005 and guessed how good she was from the start. I knew she was off this year with a new baby.

Sarah was cut from the same stock. A cool brunette, dressed in darks, long and silky black hair, mirrorshades, an athletic body. She wore a headset for her radio. She rarely, if ever, smiled. I kept an eye out for her regularly to keep a fix on her location. I relied on her heavily at the beginning for difficult queries.

For the first few hours a mild hysteria prevailed. Gradually we got into a routine of dealing with lost tickets, lost passouts, missing wristbands and weird paperwork from workers. We worked closely with the Gate Office - a metal portacabin outside the gate that dealt with lost tickets and potentially fake tickets. Frank stomped around like a gorilla on speed, he spoke to all the stewards, organised the breaks and dealt with some of the harder problems. He groomed the SIA guys with his geezer charm and knowledge of their trade. He had worked in the business himself, after he had left the army (it figured), and now (interestingly) he worked in the field of drug rehabilitation. He knew all the pills and such like. He was able to tell the SIA guys what they were turning over now and then on the trestle tables on the fence. To cap it all, he was a first-aider. I was impressed, and slightly worried.

I tried to hold back, picking a spot in the middle of the complex near the back of the first marquee with the UV lanes. From there I could see everything - the UV lanes, the gate, the turnstiles, the inside of the

wristbanding tent and through that - the cage. I was on my own, with the radio, and I could see both streams of punters and crew from where I stood. They could see me too, and many came over to talk. I had my wets on and I wanted to stand in the rain and get wet like the other stewards with no cover. I could also smoke here fairly discretely. This was my place. I probably spent about thirty per cent of my time there.

Come evening things had tailed off. It was late enough for some peaceful moments, but not late enough for the weird ones to appear. We had Friday night to look forward to that. Ten came and with it a new team of supervisors. I asked Frank if he was heading back to Crew Camping. He said he was going to see a band. I walked back through the night, through the mud and rain and teeming crowds. I dropped the paperwork and lost property back at the Oxbox and went straight to the Nuts bar. My body screamed for booze.

My body ached, my back ached, my feet ached, my mind had undergone a form of seizure. My skin felt raw, hot and dirty. My clothes were damp. I sat in a mess at an angle on sloping ground in the marquee. It was raining steadily outside. The mats at the entrances were slippery with thick mud. More mats had been laid inside. I drank cold lager eagerly. I took my beer outside and sat under the awning to smoke. A film was playing on an open-air screen - a nice touch laid on by the Nuts people.

I couldn't feel a thing, other than that I had survived.

I woke up early on Friday morning, realised I needed more rest, smoked a joint and crashed out again. The rain pattered against the flysheet. I ran the back of my hand over the inner. It felt cold and sensual. In the distance behind me I could hear the subdued voices of a couple pitched near the fence. Female/male contrapuntal music: The male a threat, the female a precious thing, out of my reach. I floated in the eddies of a skewed version of their talk - the stoned version; the version that comes at you from both without and within. They were joined by another man. The male voices sparked flashes of tension, the female tones, though slightly sarcastic, became the focal point of comfort, and I hung on to her tonalities. Momentarily I felt guilty for eavesdropping, slightly afraid for being so stoned again, and ashamed

for being alone. Yet I was adrift. Free.

It took time to mobilise myself - clothes, boots, gadgets and gear. I took small moments observing things: The purposeful cube of the leather case of the Pentax, the heavy density of my card wallet, the cool feel of the clean green t-shirt against my stale and claggy skin, the fresh briefs, my change, scooped up from a dip in the groundsheet, mixed with particles of dirt and broken shoots of grass.

I left the tent, made ablutions, took coffee and whisky and walked down the hill. Down Church Lane - nothing more than a crumbling track of asphalt barely wide enough for two cars to pass - through Home Ground and Big Ground; vast lakes of tents, gazebos, flags and wisps of smoke rising from the night's dying fires. Wrecked, dazed, damp and sleepy people standing by their tents, or picking their way carefully between the guy ropes. Down and through with the stream of bodies on the road, I found myself scanning the faces - then gave up. There was a modest crowd of a few thousand in front of the Pyramid Stage to the right, groups and couples taking the benches at the edges of the Arena. There was the smell of draw occasionally, and the boom of the huge sound system, twisting like a dying snake, even this close, in shifting currents of air. I walked through the rain, my right arm resting on my cheap and muddied shoulder bag, my torn and dirty Rohans tapering down to old brown Brashers, my feet in syncopated rotation. I was intoxicated, impressionistic, tall...and, in a way, doomed. That was how I saw myself: A ripped rip in the fabric of the locus, an anomaly conceivably, but nevertheless able to maintain the illusion of being a native. Still stoned, and slightly drunk, I walked with the surety of one who has a destination, a purpose, and is in no rush, with no apprehension, who knows the way by heart. And again I had a sense of being part of what was to become a eulogy of this mass of...being. I wonder how many looked on my face and took notice. I can even wonder now if one or more laid a glance on my face and saw part of themselves, or something new, or something old, or something interesting.

It was a kind of bullshit perhaps - a game I enjoy playing every year. My inner shame extends so far that I usually feel like an outsider here; overweight, self-conscious, too much of a gimp, too uncertain of

myself, afraid of my own body. Deep within me, so embarrassed at myself, the survival instinct, the need for a façade, burned bright and strong. My core took in their faces and still saw a people apart. This was yet the mystery of the living, of the alive, as seen by a ghost. If only one of them were to stop me and put a hand on my shoulder. That might have made me think - but only much later. Then again, fuck it. I was nothing from above. Just another ant in the swarm.

It was grimmer than usual, even factoring in the weather. You could sense it, as you made your way through the site. Not much of the Wild West in evidence. Perhaps it was the time of day.

I wandered down to the Greenfields, taking photos on the way. There was mud everywhere. It rained frequently, almost non-stop. I stuck to the roads most of the time, moving aside only when the crowds or the traffic became too hectic. The mud at the sides of the roads was full bore. I wandered back to Tom's Field, stopping for a Hibiscus Cooler at The Common Ground Café. I had a meal at Nuts and smoked another joint back at the tent. I still had five or six hours before the evening shift.

Frank and I met at the Oxbox and managed to secure a lift down to the gate. The shift started in the usual way. Everyone was on form now and the crowds at the gates were thinner at night. After the first couple of hours I settled down in my usual spot. Frank seemed to be organising everything. I dealt with the usual rounds of enquiries and kept in touch with the Oxbox and nearby gates via the radio. As the night wore on it got more interesting. At around 1am I got called over to the reentry lanes.

A steward checking tickets had a woman with him. He explained that the woman had lost her passout ticket and that her ID didn't match the details on the ticket.

"The lady says that she wasn't given a passout."

"When I came out that bloke over there, the one with the glasses, just let me through. He didn't even check my ticket! I've got a credit card, but it belongs to my friend who's inside. She's the one who bought the tickets. She left her stuff in the car and I was taking it to her. You can see that guy is barely checking the tickets. You should keep an eye

on him!"

She was in her mid-thirties I guess, quite a hard face, had clearly seen a bit of life. Her accent was strangely neutral, no hint of anything, not London, not the North or the provinces, nor the middle class. She had shortish dark hair with a practical but feminine cut. She reminded me slightly of my 50-year-old aunt, but my aunt would never wear a jacket with a black and white camouflage pattern. That threw me. There was something oddly cheap about the jacket. Cotton as well. In all this rain.

I nodded sympathetically and took her to one side. I took a quick, perfunctory look at the ticket, frowning as though I was sorry she had a problem - perhaps caused by us.

The photo on the ticket showed a woman with longer hair in her mid-to-late twenties. The woman in the photo wore trendy rectangular glasses and looked like an attractive research librarian at somewhere like Warwick University.

"What's your name?"

"Tina Harman."

Pretty good.

"What's your address?"

"Now look, I'm not sure what address is on the ticket you see, because my friend bought the tickets and I don't know what address she gave as mine."

"Ah well. I'm really sorry about this trouble. Listen, let's go to the Gate Office. It's just around the corner. They should be able to sort this out and maybe issue you with a passout ticket to get you back in."

I walked her past the SIA security people to the portacabin office just outside the fence. I left her with the two blokes there, who started checking what paperwork she had. She began to argue with them.

As I was standing outside one of the stewards on the fence gate came over. We now had stewards just outside the gate to warn people to be careful when they stepped on the muddy track way. It was very slippery.

"Could you have a chat with this gentleman? He says he's been mugged."

A young guy approached with a small rucksack and a guitar case. I took him over to the heras fence bordering the car park just outside the

gate - West 20. It was quiet here, perhaps the quietest spot within my reach.

"How are you? Are you OK?" He was visibly shaking.

"It happened back there," he said, pointing back down the perimeter fence towards Ped Gate A. "These guys, they took everything, my money, my ticket, my cards, my ID. I don't know what to do."

"You've got nothing with you?"

"I just want to get back home now, but I can't even get to the station - let alone buy a ticket. Is there any way I can get inside? I don't fancy staying out here for the night, not after what's just happened. I don't feel very safe out here."

He did look genuinely shaken up. I kept quiet for a while and pulled a rollie from the tin. Frank and I were smoking everywhere by now. We were the only ones it seemed.

"Listen, I think the best thing you could do would be to get down to Pedestrian Gate A. That's the main gate with the bus station. They've got offices there and welfare people who might be able to help you. They should be able to sort you out. And as for getting on the site, that's your best bet."

"I'm a bit nervous about walking back that way."

"I could get someone to go with you. We might be able to get you a lift in one of the security Landrovers. They drive by every five minutes."

"I'll see. I just don't know what to do. It looks like it's going to be a long night out here."

"Why don't you have a chat with the guys in the portacabin? They've got phones in there. They could maybe call someone - get you picked up."

"I'll see. I'll see."

"You're sure you're OK?"

"Yeah."

Frank walked over from the gate.

"How's it going?"

"OK. Any dramas?"

"Not really. This young chap has said he has just been mugged."

"Look, we've got a problem with this woman on the gate." He cast

his eyes towards her in conspiratorial fashion. "The one in the white jacket." It was the woman with the camo pattern jacket.

"She's gone over to the Gate Office and shown them a whole load of cards that belong to other people. Security are keeping her on the gate until the police arrive. If you ask me, she's well dodgy."

As I walked past her she started shouting...

"What's your name? I want to make a complaint about you!"

"You can take my serial number. That's all I'm obliged to give you. Do you need a pen?"

"Has anyone got a pen?!"

One of the SIA guys gave her a pen.

"What are you going to do about this! If you opened your eyes you'll see that they are not checking the fucking tickets on the way out! Go and check that guy out! I've just been over there and he's not checking anything! You can't do your job properly! That shouldn't be my problem!"

An SIA guy came over to me and said quietly: "Don't get involved."

"I'll check him out, as you say!"

Another steward from the turnstiles came over. He had a woman with him who had a passout but no ticket or ID. She looked very upset - and drunk. I took her outside the gate to the peaceful spot by the heras fence. The camo woman kept quiet on our way through.

This woman was younger than me, but more experienced and a better drunk. She had auburn hair and a beautiful West Country accent. Physically, she reminded me of Beth Gibbons, lead singer of Portishead, but she ruined that particular effect by crying. Nevertheless, she seemed to have all the right elements of stupidity and self-destruction. I could smell the booze on her breath. I was attracted to her immediately.

I took my time: "OK...What's the problem?"

She opened up and fell apart on me...

"They're saying that I can't get back in without a ticket but when I left the other gate down that way somewhere the guy on the gate just gave me one of these and he didn't ask for anything - he just gave me one of these and let me walk through. I don't know where I am now, I've just been wandering around in the dark for hours it seems and now

I'm in a real state..."

"Don't worry..."

"...and I don't know how I've managed to get into this state. I don't know what I'm going to do. I feel so stupid."

I could feel the emotion rise through me. Her eyes were beautiful. She was slightly bug-eyed - they protruded like the tips of peeled eggs in clenched fists. The tears made the pupils shine vividly under the floodlights. I know it sounds mad, but I desperately wanted to put an arm around her.

I couldn't do that though, for obvious reasons. So I tried to comfort her as best I could. I was determined to help her back in, whatever the cost, but we had to go through the motions. I was passing her over to the blokes in the Gate Office when a request came through on the radio from Vehicle Gate 4A. They were short of staff and needed some stewards. I agreed to send a couple down. I waited for radio silence and called the shift leader at the Oxbox. I warned him (and everyone else listening) that there had been a report of punters being given passouts on exit without having their ticket checked - probably at Ped Gate A.

I was called back to the gate. I left the drunk bird at the Gate Office. I never found out what happened to her. I imagine she got back in without too much hassle. She was genuine, after all.

After a while I was able to get back in position. I noticed that the police had arrived and had started quizzing the camo jacket woman. They searched her - making her strip down to her thermals under the cover of the UV lanes. Then they arrested her. She was very quiet now.

The night died away without much more incident. The people coming through after 4am were heavily subdued and sedated - and there was just a trickle compared to the earlier hours. After dawn a punter coming in - some middle-eastern looking guy - mouthed a remark to one of the SIA team (a black bloke) and things kicked off on the gate. The SIA bloke had wanted to check the him and his mate over and the punter said he wanted to deal with someone who could speak proper English. As it happened, the SIA bloke had a degree in English. The punter was a somewhat florid, hysterical prick, and he didn't know when to stop. After a kerfuffle he was nearly through - Frank had nearly succeeded in calming him down - when he shot his mouth off again.

There was a scuffle and a Landrover came down to pick the two of them up. I heard he was thrown off the site.

Changeover came and Frank left quickly to make a statement at the police compound vis-à-vis his dealings with the camo woman. He seemed quite excited at the prospect but annoyed that he couldn't have a few beers immediately (it was 7am) in case he smelt of booze in front of the cops. (I offered to roll him a joint to take in with him.) I left with another supervisor and walked back a short while later. The walk was arduous to say the least. In places the mud was knee deep. We caught up with Frank, despite the fact that he was walking like he was on a suicide mission to induce a heart attack. He seemed to be in some pain.

We all parted ways outside the Oxbox. I wanted beer, but the Nuts people were asleep and I could only secure a lousy micro-tin of Stella from the shite joint in the marquee. I threw some Old Pulteney in my coffee and smoked roll-ups. I was completely fucked. I went back to the tent and smoked a joint. Then I crashed out.

I woke up. It was just after midday on Saturday and I hadn't been to a gig yet. *Seize The Day* were playing the Croissant Neuf at 4pm. Steve Hillage was the last act on the same stage that night. I wanted to see him but I would have to start mobilising myself at around 4.30am on Sunday morning - so maybe not. Besides, the ground was atrocious now...and it was cold. I had to see *Seize The Day* though. It seemed important.

I had a few hours. I ate a falafel salad at Nuts and walked back up the fire lane to the Vango to get myself together.

Half way up the hill, on the left-hand side of the fire lane, there was a blue frame tent. Odd thing it was; too low to stand up in, but big enough for a porch area at the front - with two bedrooms at the back. Whoever had set the thing up had done a thorough job. They had built a large square of seating with split logs, as big as the tent itself, out in front of the porch - with a fire in the middle.

The whole front of the tent was open now. Inside a woman was playing with her baby son, still too young to walk. It was the chief of the stewarding organisation. She had made a good job of the impossible since taking over a few years ago. She was currently on maternity leave and, despite the atrocious weather, and the baby, was evidently here for

the weekend. Maybe the ties were too strong for her. She looked so happy sitting there, so idyllic, holding the arms of the boy over his head, him taking little steps with his chubby legs. He was laughing in his baby way, and she was smiling. As I passed she greeted me, and I hesitantly acknowledged her.

I set off for the Croissant Neuf. As stupid as it seems, I wasn't sure exactly where the stage was - only that it was somewhere in the Greenfields. I didn't bother looking at the map. I set off in what I thought was the right general direction.

It was a bad mistake. I ended up in the back ways, untracked. The mud was really nasty here. Thousands of people were on the move through it. It was shin deep; thick and viscous. It took an hour to get to the Croissant Neuf, and when I arrived I realised that I could have taken the route of the main drag, which was tarmacked, and got there in 15 minutes.

I felt like an idiot, a failure.

I went inside the circular tent, big enough for a couple of hundred people, as the band were taking the stage. There was nowhere to sit, so I stood in the middle of the crowd. I was slightly hysterical after the walk, especially having made it just in time, and I sat down and rolled a quick joint. I got to my feet again and sparked it up as the band kicked off. After five minutes I was so stoned I couldn't stand it any more. I was afraid of falling over. In a panic I left the tent.

Outside the Croissant Neuf was a small ornamental garden with wooden benches. I took a seat and tried to calm down. I felt tired - and very, very cold. It was grey and chilly, and my clothes were damp. People came and went, all of them in twos or more, as I listened to the gig in the tent behind me. It seemed typical of me to do something like this; to fail in a mission everyone else would take for granted. For weeks people had been asking me who I intended to see. I had mostly lied, to seem normal, but told the truth when it came to *Seize The Day*. How ironic: *Carpe Deum*: A pointless hour wading through mud and self-destruct in the middle of the crowd during the first song.

You see what it's like Jack? You can't get the material.

That was right, and Goodbye Eric. I shiver on the seat as people come and go. I watch the crowd emptily and smoke a roll-up. Again, I

find myself scanning the faces. Here and there a woman wearing sunglasses, as she did. Women sit around me with their children. One looks at me and smiles. The gig reaches a climax. I hear the distorted strains of Shannon singing *I Am Dust*. It starts to rain but I cannot move. I bring my hood up and clench my wet fists in my pockets. The gig ends and I join the main drag. I had the munchies and stopped by The Square Pie Company for some of their finest. I chatted to the girl behind the counter as she served me. I stood by the side of the road well within the range of the deep, rhythmic music coming from the stall's sound system. I watched the flows of people moving in time with the beat, stoned.

Back at the tent, lying down after another joint, I ruminated morbidly on the state of affairs. I was gripped, and had been for some time, with the realisation of the end. It had dug in, to be honest, on Friday. The escape was now never far from my mind...and with it the sense of loss.

It had been a personal disaster for sure. For one thing; all this time keeping an eye out for her had made me feel like a psychopath. I was confused. I couldn't understand why I was doing it. What made her special? Wasn't it a fact that she was a human being and I was an asshole? The very idea that she was living her life right now, living the festival, at this very minute no less, and I was lying in the tent agonising over my feelings was a measure of how far behind her I was. And what feelings? Did I have feelings? Were they real? It was bullshit for sure; pure bullshit. I was wrapped up in the idea of being near her for one reason alone; to prove to myself that I could love...in some way. People that live in the dark go this way probably. You get to a stage, too far down the line, too out of touch with the true pulse of life, where the only feelings you feel you can inspire are fear and revulsion. You try being blasé for a few years, you become a career drunk, you find your bliss wrapped in foil and polythene bags, but for some reason you crack one day a take a punt at being a real person. You convince yourself that there is something in her smile, something in the way she laughs, a special vulnerability, a history of suffering - that moves you to the core. You kid yourself that you are becoming one of them; one of the real people; because you can love her. But it's not love of course: It's the

painful squawk of the fool you learnt at the age of 14. You shoot your mouth off on your blog, you make allusions to 'someone special.' You make as though you are like the others, but really you are bogged down at the foot of the mountain: You are fundamentally and superabundantly *pissing in the wind*. Now the only success is failure. To see her kiss her boyfriend, for her to completely ignore you, would set the seal on the whole deal. It would follow the laws of asymmetric warfare: Victory would be total defeat; victory would be to recognise your own failure; to see yourself as the person you are, to set your jaw firm and walk slowly away, back into the shadows, back towards yourself.

Another thing: I couldn't do my job properly. Frank was better in every way. He could talk to the stewards as a man. He had a life. He was one of the living. And he was working his arse off. I didn't know what to do. I had begun to think that the Oxbox would probably make him Team Leader after the first shift. Fine. I had enjoyed a good run. I was surprised they hadn't made a move sooner. Better for me to pass over the radio myself on the next session. I'll go down to the Oxbox in the morning and tell them I would like to hand over to Frank - that he was a good bloke and more than capable of running the gate. I would take the initiative. Besides, it was *fair*.

It was settled then. Momentarily I felt grown-up. I would try to forget about her and do a good turn. I stayed in Tom's Field that evening and drank beer from the Nuts bar. It was dark and it seemed to rain all night. I drugged myself and fell asleep with the boom of the main stage sounding off only 500 metres away.

The alarm on my mobile went off at 4am. For a while I couldn't move. Pre-dawn cast a tenuous light on the Vango. The air felt wet and I felt chilled to the bone. The thought of mobilising myself seemed impossible. Instinctively I reached for the whisky and took a slug. I lay there some time, propped up on one elbow, shivering with the cold and staring into space. Slowly, I threw more clothes on and gathered up my gear. I almost wept.

I picked up the paperwork from the Oxbox and managed to blag a lift down to the gate. I met up with Frank when our shift started at around

6am. There was just a trickle of people moving through the turnstiles.

"It was tough getting out of bed this morning. Cold, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I couldn't move for a while. I had to have a nip of whisky before I could do anything."

"But you're the sort that can get away with it."

"Listen Frank, I thought you might like to take over. I had a chat with the Oxbox this morning and they said it would be OK for you to be Team Leader. You could take the radio and I'll organise the breaks. What do you think?"

"No. I wouldn't want to do that. I can run this gate, but I need you behind me."

"OK."

Steadily the flow outwards grew stronger. Frank confided that he had an infection on one of his legs and it had turned bad. We had a junior doctor on the gate and he took a look at it. By midday there were teeming crowds pouring through - moving stuff out into the car parks in preparation for a quick escape, and many just leaving for good. We had sent a few stewards to go lay straw in front of the Pyramid Stage. It was a morass down there, by all accounts. Straw and woodchip had been dumped at the gate to soak up the ground, but the central area was still a big lake of slushy mud. We coped though, and the shift unfolded without any serious event. I shouted at the crowds, apologising for the delays.

I managed to get Frank a lift back to Crew Camping about an hour before the shift finished. He was having trouble walking and was in constant pain. Katrina showed up to relieve me. During handover she found that the level of passouts had run critically low and she freaked; fearing she might have to shut the gate for a while. She got on the radio tout de suite and asked for more to be delivered. I saw a lift in the offing and hung around the gate, waiting for the wagon to arrive.

Twenty minutes later a Landrover turned up with more passouts and the driver happily agreed to take me back. He had a chore to run on the gate first - dismantling the UV lights on the first-entry lanes. I walked around the gate while he worked and thanked as many stewards as I could see...and shook their hands. After a while the driver gave me the nod and we drifted to the Landrover.

He was a cheerful chap, this driver, full of piss and vinegar in an easy way. He took his time with everything. As we started he lit a cigarette, I pulled a rollie from the tin. We lowered the windows. There was no rain now. I felt like aristocracy sitting there, privileged and lucky enough to be chauffeured back to the tent in a monster 4x4.

Quite handsome he was, and heavily tanned. A wiry frame topped with black, wavy hair. He told me that he had been involved with the festival for about 20 years. His wife sat high up in the organisation. She performed some seminal role which slips my mind now.

"I've seen it change over time. There's a lot here now, what with the television and all. But things keep changing. They change all the time."

"How long do you work down here for?"

"We are down here for a month. We used to stay on the site but now we stay with family nearby. It's much more comfortable - and I can have a shower every day - get cleaned up. It can be dirty work sometimes."

We hit a jam in the north. A one way system was in operation after a heavy vehicle had toppled over on the road and fallen on some tents. Fortunately no-one was hurt; it could have easily have killed someone.

He got out the cab and talked to a couple of corporation stewards who were directing the traffic. They let us through and we had a clear run to Tom's Field. At every checkpoint along the road he smiled and waved to the security and stewards on duty. He drove me right up to the Oxbox, at the bottom of the field. I thanked him and dropped the paperwork off. I handed in my hi-vis vest and they signed me off for my three shifts. The sun was shining now, and I walked slowly down to the bar for a beer.

The Marquee was in its final days trashed state. You had to negotiate the floor very carefully, in spite of the mats. The rain had been so heavy that there were rivers of mud inside. I sat on a chair and one leg sank into the ground.

I had a couple of beers and a few smokes. I decided that I would head back to the tent to pick up some soap and a towel for a shower. I was very tired and took the hill slowly. I paused for a breather half way up the fire lane, near the blue frame tent where I had seen the chief coordinator with her baby. There was a guy sitting on a chair outside

the tent and looking fixedly down the hill. He had long dark hair in a pony tail and wore a baseball cap. I smiled at him.

"Having a rest?" he asked.

"I've got to take it easy at the moment."

"Good idea. It's not so easy getting around now."

"To be honest; I haven't been getting about much. I've found it quite hard going. It's a shame really, 'cause I really like wandering around the Greenfields and seeing what's happening. I much prefer the smaller venues to the main stages. But the ground there is pretty atrocious. You know, shin deep mud."

I paused.

"Have you been coming here for long?"

"Oh about 25 years. The weather doesn't bother me. Eighty-five was a lot worse than this. I make sure I'm comfortable now..."

"Yeah, nice fire. I like what you've done."

"Exactly. Why should I worry about the rest of the site? I don't need to be anywhere. I've got my friends here. I've got everything I need right here."

I grabbed my towel and wash bag from the tent and wandered back down to the showers. I washed myself thoroughly, deliberately. There was mud inside the cubicles and the water from the heads had created puddles of deeper mud outside. It rained heavily while I was in there. I could hear the drops thundering on the roof.

I brushed my teeth at the communal sinks and walked slowly over to the Marquee. The rain had stopped. I walked through the tent and bought a beer from the Nuts bar and took it outside to the covered area by the salad wagon. She was sitting at one of the tables with two guys, talking.

I took a double-take...and then looked again. As she smiled at one of the guys I saw her prominent dog tooth. It was definitely her. She was wearing sunglasses.

I sat down and took out my Fine Guide, pretending to look at that afternoon's gigs. I wondered whether to put my prescription mirrorshades on, so I could look at her more stealthily. I decided against it. It seemed unnecessarily complicated. I wasn't sure I could

pull it off.

She was sitting at a ninety degree angle to the table, her body facing me, but with her head turned towards the two guys on the other side of her. She was wearing hiking gear; combat shorts, a waterproof jacket over a light top and Wellingtons. Her lower thighs and upper shins were on show. The scars below both her knees were visible. Her legs looked amazing; so strong. She had one leg resting on the other. Her auburn hair was a little longer. It touched her shoulders now.

She seemed relaxed in the company of these two young men. A little too relaxed perhaps; too easy going. Now and then she was leaned back in the chair like a banker who had just sealed a big deal. She was smiling and laughing, and kept adjusting the position of her legs. At one point she delicately ran the fingers of her right hand over the scar tissue below her right knee. It seemed inexplicable. It was almost as if she hadn't touched the skin.

I was looking at the Fine Guide and casually - perhaps not so casually - glancing over at her every 30 seconds or so. After a few minutes had passed a young couple joined me at the table.

They were a clean sort, this couple. Both dark-haired. More than likely lovers. No older than 22 or 23, I guess. The girl was attractive (so was the lad) and she sported a quaint, traditional hairstyle. It wouldn't have been out of place in the Thirties or Forties - or any other era for that matter. She didn't follow fashion.

They sat there for a while, eating their salads. Then the girl asked me if she could look at my Fine Guide.

She seemed ever-so slightly amused. There was a familiarity in her voice. An emotional intelligence - as if she could perceive my predicament - against all the odds.

I happily agreed. Then I sat there in silence, at a loss as to what to do with myself. I could have got out my notebook, but, again, it seemed overly complicated. I felt awkward and said to her...

"Of course, the problem now is that I have nothing to read."

She smiled coyly.

"Yes, I can see that would be a problem."

We engaged in idle chatter for a while until she shifted her attention to her boyfriend. They discussed some of the gigs that were left. While

the lad was talking to her he seemed to indicate with his eyes in the direction of the table she was sitting at - more than once. He had seemed to have picked up on it too.

I couldn't care a damn. While they chatted away, with an obvious knowledge of each other, I let my eyes drift around, and then slyly in her direction. I wondered which one of the men at the table was her boyfriend. They were both handsome and fit looking; in the prime of life. Either one could have beat me to a pulp in any fight or tournament in the four dimensions. As I glanced over she leaned right back in the chair. Her breasts became more clearly defined through her top. They seemed smaller than I remembered. What I could see looked like two tennis balls. I thought it might be an optical illusion - something to do with the bra, or maybe the time of month.

She moved her foot. Looking at her Wellingtons, I noticed a remarkable quality to the shape of the toe caps. They had a squareness, a symmetry, which fixated and stunned me. I knew she had beautiful feet. I had seen them.

It started to rain. I was under the awning, but they were out in the open. The three of them got up to leave. I felt a brief fear as she walked past me, my mind churning like a piston going full-bore, thinking that she might just say hello, or even look in my direction, but they all walked quickly past me into the Marquee. I glanced down at the back of her legs as she passed and caught sight of the right calf. It was chiselled with the same purposeful and clean lines as the tips of her boots. The last time I had experienced anything like it was when I had studied US Navy cruisers from the 1970s. The very shape belied hidden power and hidden potential. That calf killed me. It seemed to say all I needed to know.

It came down so hard that a while later I went into the Marquee myself, and then down onto the site. I needed to buy cigarette papers. I never made it to the markets. The aptly named Muddy Lane was rumoured to be out of action and the crowd watching Shirley Bassey was so massive that the lower reach of Church Lane was blocked. I got a packet of green ones from a friendly campsite steward at the junction overlooking the Pyramid Stage.

After dinner at Nuts I made one more foray. That was it for me. I had

had enough. I went back to the tent to get stoned and hide away from it all.

Wrapped up, my damp clothes stretched out on all the junk on the ground sheet, my boots in the porch area, mud even inside them, the rain beating heavily on the canvas, the rumble and hoo-ha in the distance, the stale smell of the roach, I lay there, falling into a fugue.

It seemed pointless, but really it had to be done, for all sorts of good reasons. Now I felt it slipping away from me. The whole year. The whole meaning of it. And I felt the idea her disappearing, fading out of my reach. I had gone too far in the wrong direction. I had lost it all. There was nothing left. I cried. I didn't know why.

I woke up in the morning at around nine. The first Oxfam bus to Bristol Temple Meads was due to leave at 12 from Red Gate - attached to Ped Gate A. I waited for a while for the rain to stop. It didn't. After coffee and whisky I broke camp. It was pouring down. It had washed the mud from the roads.

I made my way to the Oxbox with the impossible hope of blagging a lift down to the gate. Standing under cover there I met a chirpy northerner with the same plan. I gave him one of my roll-ups. He was brimming over with enthusiasm.

He did the talking when a Landrover turned up. There was a brunette at the wheel and she agreed to take us down. It still rained and rained, and parts of the route were deep with mud and water. At one point she said:

"Don't worry, we can get through anything in this."

She dropped us off at the gate. The northerner took the lead. We weaved in and out of queues and coaches until we bumped into a steward wearing his hi-vis vest. I recognised him from Ped Gate D in 2005. Another northerner. We asked him how it was going. He looked straight ahead, not at us, and with dry feeling said:

"Total chaos. Complete cock-up."

It looked like a disaster zone, with the obligatory cast of thousands of extras. We broke through crowds and dodged vehicles. The steward had pointed us in the right direction of the Oxfam bus. I was expecting a wait, but they had decided to start running to Bristol from earlier in the

day. It was, in fact, the very first scheduled bus, and when the northerner and I turned up at the door there was only one young girl in front of us. The bus was rammed to the hilt with stewards, but the driver said he had three places left. Honest.

The girl steward in front of us looked like she was on the verge of hypothermia. Poor clothing, trainers, and soaked to the skin and shivering. The coach driver was a good bloke. He took his jacket off and wrapped it around her.

We got on board with an air of desperation. My sodden tent had fallen off my backpack and someone grabbed it and stowed it with the rest of the luggage. I dumped my rucksack on the massive pile near the cab and made my way to the upper deck. There were two spare seats. I stripped off my waterproof jacket and leggings and sat down. All the windows were steamed up.

Only ten minutes later we made a start - and left the site. Fast-tracked to avoid the worst of the traffic.

It took about 45 minutes to get to Bristol Temple Meads. I said goodbye to the northerner and negotiated the station. There was still a sense of unreality on the train. I was surrounded by stewards heading for London. I fell into a deep quiet. Once I changed at Reading I was on my own.

There is something inside me which is always at work. A voice that never ceases, if you like. Only when I am on the way back do I sense its silence and stillness. There was nothing now but myself. The sun was shining over the countryside. I watched it go by, on my way home.

...

Carry me when I'm weary
Help me remember which way is home
Show me the next steps on my journey
Carry me home
Carry me home.

I am here and I am gone
I am weak and I am strong
I hold all your hearts and hands in love
As I gently let go
And fly...

Carry me home (Smy)