

EVERYTHING IS WRONG

It would be true to say that Martin was in a state of heightened sexual arousal when he had knocked on Zoë's hotel-room door. Half an hour of fumbling but energetic sex later, Martin slid off back to his room. Zoë had forgotten it could be over that quickly. She also realised that her new life offered new possibilities about which Alex, her husband, need know nothing. As she was packing her case late the next morning, Alex was wondering what to have for lunch. Zoë had not called the night before and so he had not eaten partly out of worry and partly as a form of self-punishment.

So he decided to buy a sandwich. Simply that. From a sandwich shop. Step up to the counter and ask them to make him a sandwich. Chicken. And ham. With cranberry sauce. Nothing special. Nothing tricky.

It all started to wobble when he noticed that the woman who was going to serve him had been crying. Her eyes were still red and she was trying to compose herself before serving Alex. The younger man next to her barked something at her in Italian and she rushed into the back of the shop. The young man smiled at Alex, as though apologising, and said "Yessir, what can I get for you today?".

Alex thought. A thousand thoughts crowded into his head.

He was going to order chicken. The chicken would have been battery farmed. Hundreds of terrified birds packed into tiny cages, eating the offal made from their relatives and former neighbours. Squawking at one another, unable to move, mangy skin, moulting feathers. A smell of shit throughout the shed. Evil, sharp-stinking chicken shit. And those hundreds of birds squawking and squawking. Before being slaughtered. Slashed across the throat. Their shitty carcasses then hosed down. Gallons of blood washing down drains. Then broiled in hug vats. Then sliced up and served in a sandwich in a sandwich shop on the Strand.

The young man serving Alex had dirt under his nails. Possibly from cleaning the kitchen, or possibly from blowing up the tyres on his car that morning, or possibly from dredging the bottom of the Thames with his bare hands. The possibilities raised by dirt on the hands of the person who makes your lunch is enough. And the woman was still crying in the distance.

The sandwich shop had become a violent place. The woman in the queue behind him had begun to suck the air through her dirty, yellow teeth as though trying to suck a peach stone through its skin. This rasping signalled her impatience. Her cheap nylon suit and laddered tights not helping her mood. The man on his right, who was anxiously trying to explain that he did not want butter on his already buttery sandwich was looking rapidly at his watch too. Racing to get back to work - to be shouted at by his boss, or to be harassed by a client in turn harassed by her own clients, or simply to hide from this hot afternoon. The queue of people waiting stretched out of the narrow doorway of the tiny sandwich shop. People came and went with their heads down, apologising before even bumping into people, trying not to drop their paper bags of food and drink and cholesterol.

Alex decided on salad. Lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, all genetically modified and smeared in pesticide. Humped into trucks. Bought from Southern Europe because it was easier to fix those people with lower prices than to buy the same food in Kent for a higher price. Bring it a thousand miles for pennies rather than bring it a hundred and pay a proper price. These tomatoes, bounced for a thousand miles in filthy trucks parked up in lay-bys on anonymous European motorways. Slice those tomatoes and let a thousand miles of hot air ooze out. Then cover them in mayonnaise made from salmonella-filled eggs, and emulsifiers, and other chemicals whose names he could not even pronounce. The salad had been on display for at least that day. At night, when the shop was shut, he noticed the garnish salad laid out around the glass display case on which the sandwiches were “hand-made”. He always wondered whether those show vegetables found their way into the sandwiches he bought. Full of the stale night air of an empty London sandwich shop. The breeding cockroach carnival that was a city food shop after hours.

So he turned to pick a drink out of the chiller cabinet. He wanted one of the energy drinks. Thick and glutinous. That seemed instinctively wholesome and reassuring. But those drinks were tested on dogs, or so he had read in *The Big Issue*. Hundreds of beagles being timed running round their cages, blood pressure being measured, depending on whether or not they had been force-fed glucose drinks. He could not take that. So he decided on a brown drink: fizzy, sugary and full of different chemicals. Bottled God-knows-where and shipped to this sandwich shop. Billions and billions of dollars made out of this tooth-rot. Sponsored sporting events, sold on sex. Secret recipe, titillating marketing, warm can even in the chiller cabinet. Then they made a version which was clear and another which “tasted cold even when warm” - proof, as though any were needed, that it was choc-full of unnatural chemicals doing unnatural things. The sort of chemicals which came in ten gallon drums and had a skull and crossbones on the side.

So try coffee instead. The coffee machine looked old. Thousands of gallons of London water had left its limescale deposits in the pipes. The hot water was strained through this furry expanse of metal tubing. Steam rose from it and billowed under the ceiling, causing the paintwork to splinter and crack. The coffee itself was probably sourced in Kenya or South America from farmers obliged to grow coffee to order by large suppliers. Changes in Western markets would depress the prices paid to these farmers, who were prevented from growing subsistence crops by the greed of the coffee buyers who owned much of the land. So Alex could rot his teeth by drinking oppression two ways - brown cold chemicals or brown warm chemicals – both made by people on starvation wages in another country.

Chocolate? Caffeine-enriched. Formulated to coat his taste buds, to react with his stomach lining to make him feel fuller. The little cocoa in the chocolate had been bought at rock bottom prices from a captive base of suppliers, just like the coffee. Made greasy with oil and sugar. Clinging to the decay in his teeth. Real cocoa tasted very different from the sugary confectionery plied on the British. Continental Europe has long waged a war to have British chocolate and ice cream described as something different because it tastes bitter and chemical compared to the stuff from Switzerland or Italy. In this heat he could hear the chocolate melting onto the wrapper.

The sandwich shop building itself was once part of the arcade expanse of the Strand, Regency buildings channelling the way from Charing Cross to Fleet Street. Now a conduit for whipping wind and a holding pen for fetid, polluted air. The little shop had a single fan but no air-conditioning (among all that food that lay for days on these formica slabs). Bright strip-lighting made it seem even hotter. No shade on a hot day. The electricity for the lighting was sourced from fossil fuels burned in huge power stations. Probably not coal anymore after the Tories had destroyed the coal industry and put so many towns on the dole and into jail or therapy. Nuclear power bought from France possibly lit the sandwich shop and powered the coffee machine. Even the power supply was tainted with the history of the workers' struggle.

The genesis of the clothes he stood up in occurred to him then. The loose denim trousers, seemingly innocuous and anonymous. He had noticed that morning (reading the washing instructions for the first time) that the trousers had been made in Thailand. He assumed that the hands of child labour had stitched these pockets on, slave labour at a fraction of the minimum wage in Western Europe. The cotton that made up his shirt and his underwear the same. Even the perfume he wore, had been crushed from the heads of many flowers, and picked by the hands of more workers, pin-pricks in the fingers that plucked at the thorny roses, by people who laboured like him in a job that they would rather have left behind. Trapped in a life not of their choosing. Prevent even from pausing for a moment to realise the shortcomings of their lives.

He could be happy about nothing about his life, nor the manner in which he stood, nor the place in which he stood. Everything rested on an unsatisfactory organisation of the world and of his own life. It gnawed at him. It made him weaker.

That was when it struck him: everything was wrong.

Everything is wrong in this empty, evil world. Babies die in their cots, leaving mothers robbed of their hopes for the future. Couples lie in silence. No more than 30 feet away from wherever you are in London, rats are slipping over one another, rooting among the rotting detritus of the City and copulating in foul water. Around you thousands of office workers dream of escape, of holidays, of sex, before their flickering computer screens. Dozens of people sit huddled in filthy sleeping bags, some accompanied by skinny dogs, begging change from the passing mass. In the minds of those masses throb hopes, memories, pain, emptiness, pity and shame. Like ants, like rats, like lice.

Everything is wrong.

Alex went home later. An old argument breezed in for the evening, as Alex was unpacking the contents of his various pockets onto the living room table. Zoë would not let him use a handkerchief. She was concerned that they were filthy things that carried germs around in your pocket for days or weeks. Much better, she said, to use

tissues or toilet paper and throw them away afterwards. Alex liked to have a handkerchief and his watch and his zip – all of them checked compulsively twelve times an hour. It was the only way that he could shake off the feeling that he had left the front door open, or that the sky was about to fall on his head.

Zoë had told him (for the last time, she said) that she did not like him carrying hankies around. Alex amassed a defence of the contents of his trouser pockets.

‘Don’t you see? This whole world is built on filth and germs. You and I both are smeared in germs. Armies of bacteria live in your armpits, waging war against the virus that is trying to penetrate your skin. Airborne mites land on your clothes, billions by the hour, and borrow their way through to the epidermis. On their way there they are fucking, and feeding, and shitting all over your precious white T-shirt. And when you blow your nose on your precious tissue, what happens then? I’ll tell you. Some of the germs land in the snot on the tissue. Others are sprayed out into the air, bouncing off the tissue and landing on your forehead. Others you inhale again immediately.

‘Let’s examine your ideal night out - nibbles and drinks at some louche Soho bar. When you use the towel in the public toilet, don’t you always give the thing two tugs. The first tug, *t-ching*, moves someone else’s wet bit of the towel round a little. But then you automatically give it a second tug, don’t you? *T-ching*. Just so that the germs from the person before have not had a chance to run up the towel to get you. Then you clean your precious hands because your genitals are so filthy. Well your genitals are less filthy than your mouth. Your nose and mouth are dirtier as you rub chemical moisturiser into them in the toilet mirror. You are standing in a toilet cleaning your hands while you are inhaling the steam from other people’s piss and acrid clouds of methane from their farty shite.

‘Then you go back to the table and eat from the same peanut bowl as all those people who have not washed their hands. A hundred peanuts and a million wiggly, microscopic bits of evil just wanting to get in your guts. But that’s what you’ve got bloody intestines and enzymes for, for God’s sake. So why are you worried about handkerchiefs?’

Zoë had got up and left the room by this stage. She banged about in the kitchen but Alex had warmed to a theme. He followed her to the kitchen doorway.

‘You go into the street and it is full of little dogs covered in fleas and ticks and scabs. Cats spend their time sitting on roofs and you *pat them*. Their backs are covered in sooty, dirty viral spores. They lick themselves. You are patting a thin film of cat spit when you coo at them.

‘Your precious car coughs out more lead on each journey round to Sainsbury’s than there was lead in the pencils in a thousand primary schools for a thousand years. And you are worried about handkerchiefs? When you blow your nose, it is black from the dirt in this city. There is no need to keep it in a handkerchief when it is blowing in the air all around you.’

Zoë took a glass down from the cupboard and tried to make some squash. Her hands were shaking as she tried to ignore the tirade. Alex went on.

‘That’s right, turn the tap on. Drink water that has been through the digestive tracts of a thousand people. Once that was boiling cabbages, then it was a glass of Pimms, then it was a long soak in the bath - then it was someone else’s piss eighteen times before being filled with fluoride. Probably the piss of someone who never cleans their hankie. And now you are drinking it down like it was poured from God’s own crystal decanter. Make it clean. Boil it up in the kettle that is furred with lime and lice and God knows what else. Go on ...’

In time Zoë turned to him. ‘Is this really about dirt and hankies?’

‘No. It’s not.’

‘So ... what is it about, Alex?’

‘Are you fucking Martin?’

He said the last word with what he took to be a savage, sarcastic twist. Zoë dropped the teapot and marched straight out of the front door.

He did not see her again for a number of days.