

Anarchists Don't Wear Tweed

or

The Riddle of the Bronze Stakhanov

A Novel by Ken Morlich

Part I Hangover

For you it is the will of heaven and destiny that ye shall return here with the fleece; but meanwhile both going and returning, countless trials await you.

The Argonautica
Apollonius of Rhodes

Like one that on a lonesome road
 Doth walk in fear and dread...
 Because he knows, a frightful fiend
 Doth close behind him tread

S.T. Coleridge - *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*

I arrive at the bus station in indeterminate weather; the light does not indicate clearly the time of day, and the stained concrete walls of the terminus' superstructure seem to merge with the overcast sky. I am uncertain of the precise nature and number of items that comprise my luggage and spend some time investigating the possibility of eight or nine of my pockets as the most likely repository of my ticket. 'Passports', I mutter, 'are easy'. A passport is a familiar lozenge with reassuringly rounded edges that can be identified through herringbone tweed, corduroy or even (grotesque violation of the dictates of fashion though it be) the synthetic wadding of a ski jacket. A ticket is more a notional than an actual entity: it has no thickness and exchanges its physical state with car parking receipts, credit card transaction slips and other worthless flotsam with a maliciousness that borders on psychosis. I breathe heavily and manoeuvre my belt to a position first above the turgid, adipose roll of my midriff, and then below it. This procedure pays dividends and, with a cry of triumph, I produce a slip of plasticised papery material bearing numberless indecipherable codes and inscriptions. This I proffer to the attendant at the speckled plexiglass window of the ticket booth. Behind me in the queue stand an assorted rabble of fellow passengers of the sort most frequently encountered in bus stations: four or five women with prams; a brace of shabby middle-aged men who poison their neighbours' pets and habitually murder prostitutes; college students clutching mobile telephones; a man with heavy shoes and a faded lumberjack shirt. Turning sideways, I pretend to tie my shoelace. The rabble ignores me. Instead of entering the coach, I scuttle crabwise into WH Smith, backing around the newspaper stand - "SICK SIR SNARED IN SEX PERV PROBE", thunders a tabloid. It wouldn't surprise me at all to get a mention in this story somewhere, but I push on to the magazine shelves and select the first periodical that comes to hand: the somewhat improbably titled "Light Rail and Tramway Gazette." Still sidelong, I bear it tentatively to the cash desk. At the edge of my peripheral vision I glimpse what must surely be the skirt of a leather trenchcoat protruding from a tiled pillar. I suck myself behind a stack of aggressively poised confectionery.

"Half price chocolate today?" queries the checkout girl.

"Three" I say, unaccountably, and hand over a bank note.

It's not exactly that I'm avoiding Trevor, or, as may appear to be the case, fleeing from Trevor. There are large number of other persons, situations and alleged responsibilities that I am every bit as eager to avoid as I am the brooding, paranoid IT helpdesk operative, part time sound engineer and paramour of my school cleaning lady who goes by that name. It will, I decide, be all the better if Trevor does not see me getting on the coach to London Victoria, ultimate destination Katowice, if he does not relay that information to Donna, the school cleaner, who does not then pass it on to my English Department colleague Roberta Lusk, who does not in turn inform headmaster Larry Sandcock, my feudal lord and master, the ultimate arbiter who sees all things as long as he gets the required concentration of sherry in his bloodstream to permit him to function coherently. I exit the 'entrance' turnstile - backwards - with some entanglement of my overcoat, reverse round an advertising hoarding exhorting me in bold primary colours to upgrade my mobile phone package, and make a

discreet approach to the London bound coach from the wrong end of the queue.

It was early-ish on a weekday morning, and I was on my way to the school where I worked, when Trevor overtook me in his motor car as we both rounded the corner of Union Terrace. Trevor shouts at people he knows when he drives past them in the street, and that particular day was no exception.

"White man came across the sea..." he rasped from the window of his second generation Renault 5. "He brought us pain and misery..." he added over his shoulder as he passed.

I sighed.

"Yes I am let loose from the noose..." bleated Trevor, changing to an unconnected lyric in mid flow. "Satan oscillate my metallic sonatas!" Happily, he soon passed out of the range of my hearing and his voice died away in the irritable drone of the morning traffic. A bus ground slowly along beside me, disgorged its stomach contents of commuters onto the gum-spotted pavement, and lumbered off again, nudging urgently with its blunt nose against the knot of cyclists that impeded its progress past the Aberdeen Caledonian Hotel and onwards to the brutalist concrete slab of Denburn House flats.

Trevor is one of those persons who used to be called 'Goths'. These days they probably choose another title for themselves from the contemporary milieu of catacomb camp, but in my book any man who dyes his hair black, kohls his eyelashes, and wears a long black Gestapo coat is a Goth. One thing that Trevor has in common with the best Goths (and by this I mean of course the most palpably risible of them) is that he has a strong regional accent - Runcorn, I fancy - one of those accents which is halfway between a comic turn and a speech impediment, the 'r's forced through the teeth as though chewing celery. I have known him for a long time, but I should never have been so foolish as to agree to join him in a business venture.

I knew that Trevor's motor car was a second generation Renault because he had told me so as I sat uncomfortably in the uncongenial lounge bar of the Wheelwright's Arms the previous evening.

Trevor sat across the table from me and Donna to his left, sketching delicate cruciform patterns on the damp pub table with the recently extinguished butt of a roll-up.

"Here, let me", Trevor had added, adorning the stained faux mahogany with a pentagram of spilled Guinness with the stub of his mangled index finger. "Now Satan loves us". He *flipped the metal horns*, as the expression goes, and took Donna's lower lip between his teeth affectionately.

"But to return to the subject of your motor car..." I prompted. Displays of affection do not embarrass me, but I have an old-fashioned aversion to erotically motivated cannibalism.

"Transversely mounted powertrain" said Trevor. He let this hang for a few moments, enjoying my blank incomprehension. "I wouldn't give you a blind gnat's fart for one" he added, by way of explanation.

"Is that expression all your own?" I enquired.

"Trev wouldn't piss on one in the street if it was on fire" Donna asserted. I agreed that in the circumstances it would be more apposite to summon the fire brigade. Or else run.

"1.7 F-Type, them's my wheels of choice" Trevor continued. "No corner cutting on those models, Max. MacPherson struts for suspension?" he snorted derisively. Donna echoed his disapproval with a semi-nasal aspiration of her own. "No, give me the 1.7 F. It's also surprisingly practical, mate. You can get eight mic stands across the passenger seat and a pair of RCF TT 25s in the back. Very roomy."

"RCF TT 25s," I agreed. "Highly convenient, I should have thought."

"Why don't we take a stroll out back and go for a spin in the Argo?" Trevor proposed.

"The Argo? - anything to do with the 'nauts of the same name?"

"Very erudite of you, Max, you big twat" said Trevor, offensively, giving me a patronising squeeze of the shoulder. "I calls it the Argo on account of how well benched it is..."

"Yes, well I see that... a trireme or something is it?"

"Trev will show you some of the more impressive features" Donna said.

"Like the beam divine which Athena had brought from an oak of Dodona?" I enquired. "Will you also be demonstrating the ambrosial strength that Argus threw in when he knitted her together with bolt?"

Trevor ignored my remark.

"Max and I won't be long" he said to Donna. "Next round's yours anyway. Ta-ta." He laid a bank note on the slick, beer soaked tabletop in front of her and gestured with his thumb towards the door. I pulled on the rumpled sports jacket that was not entirely appropriate to Trevor's choice of venue and followed him out into the dingy, piss-reeking courtyard at the back of the pub.

The Argo was a warm brown in colour, mid way between gravy and chip-shop curry sauce. It was a hue that had fallen out of the car manufacturer's palette some decades previously and for some reason was yet to make a comeback. The car had a single windscreen wiper (fortunately the one on the driver's side) and retained only two of its original complement of hub caps. It looked as though it was set too high to the ground, and a few inches of suspension spring showed indecently in the rear wheel arches, as though the Argo was hoisting up its lower garments to straighten a stocking seam. Trevor looked at me expectantly. "Rather nice thole pins, I must say" I put in. "Now when gleaming dawn with bright eyes beheld the lofty peaks of Pelion, and the calm headlands were being drenched as the sea was ruffled by the winds, then Tiphys awoke from sleep; and at once he roused his comrades to go on board and make ready the oars. And a strange cry did the harbour of Pagasae utter, yea and Pelian Argo herself, urging them to set forth." I was declaiming now, rather enjoying myself.

"You fucking pretentious knob end" said Trevor. "Every dickhead with an aye-phone acts like he's Jeremy fucking Paxman."

"How do you know I'm not an habitual Hellenist?" I tested him.

"You're reading it off your phone" said Trevor. "Now get in the back seat, put the drum carpet over your head and let's go."

I don't know whether you have licked the floor of a live music venue after it has been vacated by its acrid, sweat-reeking clientele; perhaps you have never been inclined to. Equally, I could surmise that you have never sniffed the foam cartridge shield of a veteran SM58 microphone, sweated on and spattered over by scores of talentless morons, most of them chain smokers with a liking for the most noisome of unpasteurised cheeses. In all likelihood you never have. I, on the other hand, in being forced under Trevor's drum carpet, have plumbed the very depths of olfactory purgatory. The tenth-hand, nine foot square piece of synthetic loop-pile that had for some years been deployed by Trevor to keep overweight bald men from sliding away from their unfortunate percussion kits; the very rug on which they trampled, stubbed out fags, spilt beer and - for all I knew - made a habit of urinating, lay heavily across my face, torso and doubled knees, as Trevor accelerated with surprising alacrity over the pot-holed cobbles of the back lane of the Wheelwright's Arms. I could feel the panic that attends imminent suffocation rising within me.

"Trev me old er... mate" I called, fumbling ineffectually with the malodorous folds above me, "is this sort of secrecy absolutely necessary?"

"Shut up" said Trevor, "and stay under the fucking carpet."

"Ah, right" I responded, manfully preventing myself from vomiting by visualising a very finely shaved sliver of lime floating in a silver bucket of iced mineral water. Something seemed to be pinning me down,

immobile, as though a number of those animated skeletons beloved of rock music aficionados and stop-motion animators were holding me through the carpet with their bony Phalanges. 'The bastard's thrown half a dozen microphone stands on top of me', I thought. The original Argonauts had undergone much more dignified tests of courage. Trevor, I dully supposed, was probably about to drive between a pair of perilously clashing wheelie bins, or perhaps preparing to run the gauntlet of an unusually testy seagull - certainly the shit-hawks that flapped and strutted over the granite edifices of Aberdeen were harpies of a sort, snatching what they could from the superabundant refuse strewn in endless profusion by the city's never-ending stream of urban pleasure seekers. Trevor was, I realised, quite right about one thing. I *was* a pretentious knob end.