

'The way to Inchfuckery' by Hamish Baker French

Never forget that the last Saturday night ferry, possibly anywhere in the world, is going to be the one where there are people sick with drink on it. As the sunset flickered over the peninsula, the rolling shouts of a football chant enthusiastically echoed around the harbour walls. A group of lads, emotionally united with their arms wrapped around each other, came roiling forward along the pier. The ones on either end of the gaggle stumbled. They had drawn the short straw in positioning, only allowing them one shoulder or neck to cling to unevenly. So these were to be my companions on the ferry to Inchfuckery.

On board, an older couple, with matching, roomy pressed jeans and salt-and-pepper hair, stood stoically at the stern lounge windows. They did not engage me with any smile or glance, even though I was the only other person with them. Armed with binoculars, apples and playing cards, they only had need of each other.

The low, wipe-easy lounge benches were at the wrong height for sitting but the right height for lying prostrate on, in a storm. I had bought from the ship's shop a copy of the *Inchfuckery Gazette*. A slim volume for a somewhat sizeable price, but there is nothing like learning the habits of a new place through its adverts, births, marriages and deaths. Inchfuckery was no different. The back page was devoted to the Isles Games, which, although several years away, already had nine teams formed. The article asked for any unemployed trainers to get in touch. On the back inside page, a miscreant had a court appointment for sheep worrying, in the parish of Inchfuckwit.

As the ship set sail, I made my way to the Captain's Canteen for some sustenance, not knowing what would await me at my lodgings at Inchfuckery at so late an hour. A callow female, with a hacking cough that should have ruled her out of serving food, advised that there was curry, lasagne or a steak pie with a flaky puff top available. The curry at least wasn't oval, so I indicated that was the one for me. I had noted from the Captain's safety message and this young woman's verbal tour of the hot counter that the Inchfuckery dialect was not unpleasant. However, each speaker rushed the end of every sentence, as if some nasty denouement would likely occur which required them to get the words out quicker than they might. I sat quietly at the table as near to the windows as I could get. It was a night sail, and I wanted to at least see as much of the departing landscape before it was swallowed up.

The lads with their undying loyalty for each other, at least until the end of the night, had, of course, made straight for the Bosun's Bar at the stern. The odd shout boiled over. They, in their youth, had their run and rule of the ship. Some had got the munchies, so sent out two scouts, weaving their way up the length of the ship, even though it was calm on the wave. 'Lasagne, Bawbie, Lasagne!' he shouted to his second in command.

'Aye, Brinch', the second voice slurred. 'Go large'.

'You want chips or salad with it?' the woman serving spluttered.

'Chips or salad, Bawbie?' His friend nobly nodded. 'Aye chips. I'll hae the curry myself. Aye, chips with that.'

I looked down at the *Inchfuckery Gazette*, not wishing to catch the lasagne or curry eaters' eyes. One of the ship's pursers came from the kitchen to stop at their table. 'Bawbie? Brinch? Long time no see!' The lads then went through their mental indices as best they could. All thought of eating was diminished as they took part in the favourite pastime of islanders for time immemorial. Who are you? Who are you related to? Whence do you come? When did I last see you?

The purser helped them out. 'I used to have a ponytail. You ken my brother – big Billy Bastard! He works the Inchfuckery Generator.'

It was beautiful to see recognition, like dawn, spreading across the pimpled boys' faces! 'Ah Sean Fecker, Billy Bastard's brother from Kilkenny. Fuck's sake man, it's been a good while! Last time I saw you, yer face was tripping you as Agnes frae behind Lauren Hill had fucked off and left you for that Paul Pott, the wee dictator frae Sooth.'

Sean Fecker looked crestfallen at the memory, but then straightened himself. An elaborate knuckle bashing, shoulder popping ceremony took place. I left them to their reminiscences, taking pleasure in the young.

Back in the lounge, now a strangely quiet and well-lit eyrie above all the bustle of the food and drink, I settled myself back down for the remaining voyage. The sound of retching came from the gents, then a hiatus as a young lad in a hoodie hurled himself onto the bench in an immediately supine position. He was safe enough, for now, as he had so recently voided his innards. Sleep stole him from himself, but he was not to be left for long. A lanky lad burst in, treating the seats' formation like a difficult maze. When he finally caught sight of his pal, he got right up in his face and yanked him up.

'Snawball, what's the matter? What's the matter?' It really was obvious what the matter was. Snawball was unable to do more than moan. Leaning forward, he drew his blue hood up as it had slipped during the fracas, and then, to save further onslaught, hugged his arms over his head as if getting battered. 'Haha, Snawball's K.O.ed', shouted his pal back down the hall. And so he was. When his hood had fallen, it revealed his scarlet face, at odds with the lily-white skin of his hands and delicate wrists. Snawball rocked forward and found a new equilibrium, one which didn't place too much pressure on his troubled guts.

I did not wish to hear any more and when, several minutes later, Snawball began to gulp air, I repaired, for the remainder of our voyage, back down to the Captain's Canteen. The grill was down, and the fluorescent lights shimmered on the laminated menu cards. The hacking cough of the server could be heard from time to time, but the sounds within the boat mellowed it out.

The ferry divulged us all into the darkness an hour later. There was no one to meet the lads, but they were not my problem. I made my way to the hotel up on the hill. It had so many doors it was difficult to discern which to take. The bar was nearly empty, save for a young man talking earnestly to an elderly gentleman about some fencing difficulties. They may have been religious as they were drinking half pints. There was no bar person. I patiently waited on. The young man indicated I should go round the corner to reception where the proprietor would tend to my needs.

Again, reception was deserted, yet a skip cap and mustard fleece flung over an office chair indicated that someone was around. I rang the bell, then waited, then rang it again. Finally, a man in his fifties with a red nose that looked like it had been ill stuck on from the wrong kit, surfaced from yet another door. There was no hello or welcome, so I explained that I had been on a long journey, was off the last ferry and required the single room that I had booked. Silently, the man reached for a key with a number two on it and gesticulated it would be found down that corridor. I was left to make my own way. I found the room. It had seen better days, with the door to the ensuite retaining the angry kick of a past inhabitant.

Moreover, as time wore on, one could feel a cold dampness seeping from the walls that even a dim bedside light could not make cosier. The single bed had a double dip in it, the quilt no thicker than a handkerchief. So tired was I that I fell asleep in my clothes. At three in the morning, I awoke with my back a deathly cold, so I tried sleeping in my overcoat, but this proved difficult. In a trick learnt from my camping days, I put on more clothing from my rucksack. I awoke at six, to the most fantastic sunrise, which even the dirty streaks on the window could not dull. The oranges and reds lit up the sea loch. The room could not be faulted for the view, although the curtains could; I could now see a black mould grew on their surface resting nearest the windowpane. I dined on poached egg and toast, in the sun lounge, which was marginally warmer than that god-forsaken room.

I felt the urge to get out into the island, as my stay this time was only short. The roads were deserted. What kind of people lived here? Cans of Strongbow littered the roadside ditches. I passed a boarded up manse. The glimmer of kingfisher-blue packets of Mayfair and Sovereign cigarettes poked out of the peaty ground at intervals, like pieces of discarded pottery. A child's red spade lay against some green spiky rushes. A multitude of feathers from a long-departed seagull lay matted in the grass. Nearby, I could make out cartoon laughing faces on some rubbish. On others, the branding had been worn away by the weather to the silver tin. Yellow flakes and quavers marked my way.

I thought I spied an old man in an orange boiler suit sitting in the driver's seat in a derelict bus at the roadside. Its number plate was crushed in and rusted. My first local inhabitant beyond the ferry and hotel! I realised how much a simple exchange of pleasantries would brighten my gloom. I hastened my step. However, as I neared, I saw a paper mannequin, wrapped in Sellotape, had been fashioned to inhabit the boiler suit. The tubular steel of the signposts nearby acted as wind chimes, creating an eerie whistle.

A church lay up ahead at the junction. Surely I could find some solace within. I carefully shut the double doors behind me and lost myself within its holy vacuum. Some pairs of black fleece gloves lay on the back pew. Perhaps an encouragement to pray for a while longer, as, although it was late spring, I could see my breath in the air. I lit a tea light on the little altar at the front right and gave thanks, looking at the beatific faces of the painted statues lining the walls. Being not too religious, I knew not how to spend more time in this manner, so moved to the gift section at the back. Here, in little holders, lay tiny pilgrim trinkets of the saints for 50p each. I picked each one up to examine their inscriptions – St. Peregrine, St. Martha, St. Clare and St. Philomena. One really had to delve into the holders to pick them up. Then, in the dim light, I saw the upturned carapaces of dead wood lice, who had crawled into these cups for refuge and been unable to climb out. I rather felt like that myself the more time I spent on Inchfuckery.

I tried to settle myself as I moved back out onto the road, focusing once more on the channels of water in the ditches that ran parallel. Water should be the stuff of life, but its passage was ironically clogged by the empty bottles of mineral water that, one could only assume, had been chucked out the windows of passing cars. I knelt to take a photograph of a red packet of Panadol Extra. I thought of the young hooded lad on last night's ferry who could have done with such medication.

Next to it, a red pencil had been split in half right down the length of its shaft. Perhaps this, in itself, was a bad omen for my prospective visit to Inchfuckery, as I had held hopes of applying to be its next writer in residence. Why could not my eyes see the rolling vistas of machair, hill and granite formations? I confess, I could only see the detritus of Inchfuckery on this day. Please God that I won't be stranded.

Jenny Brownrigg, 2016.