

DINING OUT WITH THE GAS GIANTS PART ONE

When you're press, you get used to having doors slammed in your face; to meeting a glare or refusal to comment in response to your polite approach; but you never expect that the subject of your article will drop a mountain on your head.

That year was also building up to a riot summer, which was to end in deaths. We'd had early warning of possible riots, but again, you can't expect the eventual outcome.

This all started around St. Patrick's Day. Myron and I were sitting with a few Irish people in Greenwich, but that long finger of land to the east of Greenwich which pokes northward as a loop of the Thames wets its toes. We were in a coffee shop looking over the pedestrian area around the Dome. This creamy white round structure, with yellow metal support spokes sticking up hedgehog-like, mimics a clock from overhead, each spoke a lattice like a mini Eiffel Tower. The Dome had been built to celebrate the turn of the Millennium, all those decades in the past.

"Thanks again for coming with us," said Saoirse, who was a cultural attaché from the Irish Embassy here in London. He was a tall, intense-looking man in his late twenties, with curling reddish-blond hair and a neat suit in that spring's light grey. He didn't wear a tie.

"We've sent letters and mails every year since they moved in but they've never answered," grumbled Julia, from one of the business promotion groups which tries to make everyone feel amiable towards Ireland. Which mostly they do. Julia was a short but elegant dark-haired lady in her thirties, wearing dark green. Green wasn't in this season unless it was mint green. I had that on good authority.

Me, I was wearing black slacks and white shirt, as I often do, a lightweight dark jacket and the kind of bright red hair and blue eyes which tell everyone I'm Irish without wearing green.

"Yes, we really need you," said another of the group, Anto. He was a student of liberal arts or something.

"Donal would do anything for the Irish community here," Myron assured them, grinning. My best friend was not Irish, being three quarters from Stepney and one quarter from the island of Jamaica, which was why the group had not contacted him. We generally worked as a team so they got him anyway. He had a shirt striped in mint green and navy with white pocket; couldn't fault him. Myron generally smiles, with a handsome face that is long rather than

round and he often wears a beard. At this time he had traded it for a neat moustache. The girls like him, but that March neither of us had a girlfriend. I'd looked into niche dating for Valentine's Day but the bitter weather and rampant shuttle-flu viruses had deterred many people from socialising during winter.

"Of course, there are other Irish journalists in town," said Saoirse. "But everyone knows you are the foremost off-world watchers."

"You've no hope of impressing them," I informed the group. "So going in as a large body would do no good and might be misinterpreted as a show of force. They don't think too much of women so Julia had better not be your spokesperson." Julia's jaw firmed, but she didn't speak. They needed my information; they didn't need to like it. "They might not be fond of the press, I don't know. So don't state outright that that's what I am but call me something halfway suitable."

"Scribe?" asked Julia.

"They won't know that word," said Myron.

"Recorder of matters," said Saoirse, which seemed good enough. He took out a pair of glasses which looked ordinary but turned out to be net-enabled. "I'd better speak, Donal, but you can mail me tips or comments as we go."

"First tip," I said. "Pretend you don't notice the smell."

After brief discussion we left Myron and Anto with more coffee while Julia, Saoirse and I walked across to the entry to the Dome.

Embassy of Jupiter, read a sign across the doorway. For those unsure, there was an image of a striped globe.

The Dome is big. The structure was originally built to hold an exhibition, then found its way into private ownership when the state couldn't think of what to do with it next. Since then the venue hosted concerts and other public events, changing hands a couple of times and changing names to suit corporations, until the people from Jupiter bought it overnight. We've written about it. Partly these off-worlders live in the Dome and partly they use it as an embassy, though our experience of them so far hadn't found them to be diplomatic. They've adopted such of our systems as suit them, while showing us little of themselves.

Saoirse showed his credentials to the ordinary English uniformed guy guarding the door. The Jovians think this is a menial task so they engage a private security firm. If you believed Saoirse we had an appointment; he certainly sounded convincing. We were allowed to pass.

The interior space we entered was just an anteroom, a bland space with no seating and a counter behind which we could see a Jovian. He was large, as they are, mottled grey in colour and rounded, with rubbery skin and large dark eyes scarily like our own. They don't have nose or ears or hair, and their mouth has rubbery lips which flap idly with no visible teeth. This guy was sucking the end of a grey tube which extended into a pocket in his clothing. The clothing demonstrated that this guy bulged all over, since they expand when they leave Jupiter's pressure. His one-piece coverall garment was dark red with a few white stripes.

"Yess?" he asked, hissing a bit because we'd surprised him.

Saoirse introduced us, and when my function as a recorder was mentioned I thought it safe to take out my tablet. A metal detector wand lay on the counter so we'd be searched if we were to go any further into the Dome. I didn't intend to speak, but I started keying down impressions right away; I already had a mail program up and ready.

"Sso?" asked the Jovian.

Saoirse began to explain.

"Every year in London, and in many other major cities around the world, large buildings are lit in green. This is to celebrate the Irish national day, which is March seventeenth, tomorrow. The London Eye is lit in green, for example. In the past the Dome has been lit green, which is easily done by slipping green filters in to your lamps. We would be pleased if you could do this for us again this year. We'd be happy to supply the filters."

The guy was looking at him. I kept my eyes low so he would not notice me. They take a lot of information through their eyes, and tend to make strong eye contact when they converse.

"Sso?" he asked again.

"This is a sign of good friendship, a pleasing custom and admired by all. The world looks at this scene and understands that the cultural status is advantageous to all."

The guy's skin wasn't changing colour in the slightest. His lips were flapping aimlessly and his fingers were rippling in a gentle motion on the counter just like weed in an aquarium. People get the impression that Jovians have too many fingers; that's because they do. Not too many for them, but more than even the Martians, who have six digits per hand. Six is the fewest I've seen on a Jovian, and the number varies according to which hand, which person and even which situation. Nobody seeing the rubbery motions would imagine that there is bone inside the fingers, and I'd

be surprised if their bodies have bones at all, since cartilage is better at withstanding immense pressure.

He's just a guard. He doesn't know anything, I mailed to Saoirse. The net-enabled glasses flashed the mail in front of his eyes, visible only from the inside of the left lens.

"Now that I've given you an overview of our purpose, I would like to speak to someone in authority, a counterpart for cultural or trading relations if possible," Saoirse picked right up on my mail.

For the first time a ripple of brownish colour crossed the guard's skin and he turned to a vidscreen on the wall behind him, touching a button to start a small camera working. I could see the screen as yellowish and cloudy, and an inset small picture in the bottom right corner which must be the vid feed from this camera showing the guard himself, was reddish in hue with the outline of the guard's face. A Jovian came into focus in the main image and the guard gurgled and hissed, colours flitting across his bulbous head.

"Will come. You wait," said the guard, instantly ceasing to concern himself with us. We stood in polite silence, eyeing the sizeable wall photo of Jupiter from space with three large moons shadowing the surface, which was the sole decoration. The two other Earth people began a muted general chat about the parade and festival lined up for tomorrow. I didn't engage, listening to any sounds the Dome produced. A while passed; I mailed Myron with an update. I wondered as I did, whether the Jovians had removed or disabled the mail hub in the Dome. There were plenty of office buildings nearby so my mail request would ping one of their hubs, but the press are just nosey that way.

I appeared to be studying the wall photo, but I was using the faint reflection off its gloss surface to watch the guard. Journalists didn't get inside the Dome – nobody did – and I wanted to learn all I could. The guard thought himself unobserved, and after a time his boneless fingers rippled across the counter and happened to touch upon the same spot Saoirse had touched with a hand. One finger flattened slightly against the counter, as if pressing down, then picked up again and the hand withdrew.

I'd seen these guys eat. They exhibited interest and sometimes pleasure when they handled their food – table manners on Jupiter included eating with your fingers, apparently. Then they chucked the morsel down the toothless maw with no further reaction. They even stuck their fingers in their layered cocktails, though the fingers didn't act as siphons.

Got it, I thought. You taste with your fingertips. You've just sampled Saoirse's skin fluids.

Eventually we heard a sound from behind the door at the back of the counter. The guard had placed himself close to it and now lifted one hand to a light inset into the door; as the door surface was quite shiny I saw a reflection of orange and guessed that he'd made part of his hand's skin orange. The door opened and a paler version of the guard stood there; why open a door yourself when you can get a lower status person to do it.

"Yess?" asked this new person, who got told the spiel again, showing occasional ripples across his head and colour mottling as he listened. He was thinking.

"This is a token of allegiance with one tribe or faction," he elucidated his comprehension. "But what of other tribes? Setting up to befriend one tribe could mean others declare enmity or suspicion."

"It's absolutely not a hostility issue," Julia told him, forgetting or else impatient from the wait. The man ignored her, looking only at Saoirse.

"I can show you all the nations around the world which do this," said Saoirse, producing his tablet with a cheerful set of green images. Christ the Redeemer, Sydney Opera House, Brandenburg Gate, London Eye, Eiffel Tower, Pyramids and Sphinx, Lady Liberty; many more. The man hissed a bit, sucking on his tube as the guard had done. His coveralls were similar though I could discern a difference in the striping which might mean something. The guard was watching us covertly, I realised, picking up on the senior man's skin colour changes. If this attaché thought he ought to summon help, the guard would know before we did.

The attaché finally decided not to make a decision.

"Anything affecting this embassy must be referred to Jupiter," he told Saoirse. "If you leave a copy I will send it in the next transmissions and when we get an answer I will know how is best to proceed."

"If that's what you need to do. How long will that take?" asked Saoirse.

The man's face was bland, not a thought crossing his big head.

"You do this every Earth year, you say? We might know by next year. Or not. The people on Jupiter have many matters of importance to concern them."

"Of course they do. Well, thank you so much for seeing us, we do appreciate it."

We held no further interest for this man, who turned his back on us and left, the guard opening his door again. The guard took a

copy of the images from Saoirse without exhibiting any curiosity and we left.

Julia said some impolite words.

“He totally blanked me! Like I didn’t exist!”

“I did warn you,” I said. “S’cuse me a minute, I’ll come back to the coffee shop.”

I left the fuming woman and resigned man and walked across the tiled surface towards a red Royal Mail van parked just about where you’d expect it to be. I was keying a mail to a friend into my tablet as I walked. The pavement tiles contain inset angled lines to continue the outward lines of the metal spokes, and each line has a quotation, mostly about time from British authors or poets. Beyond the nearby clustered office environment I could see red buses pulling out of the terminus. The Tube and Docklands Light Railway don’t come down this far, which makes no sense in terms of a concert venue. They never would be extended now. By the waterside was the terminus for the cable car across the Thames. I’d taken that cable car many times, enjoying the view of the Thames Barrier still further out towards the sea, and busy little City Airport at the top of the Isle of Dogs. The air was cool, this close to the North Sea, but I thought it had been cooler inside the Dome.

“Hi,” I said to the man with the van, who was doing something with a diagnostic tool which pinged a mail hub. “Sorry to bother you, I’m press, *London’s Eye*.”

“Oh yeah, I read that. Good on local issues. The wife likes the women’s pages,” he told me, continuing to work.

“I was just wondering if the Jovians disabled or removed their mail hub?”

“They did,” he said, looking straight at me. “They took it out soon as the main party arrived. I suppose they thought it could be used to hear their conversations or something. Every now and then we get complaints from people out and about here. I have to come and test if any of the other buildings’ hubs are down. There are enough addresses with them for good coverage, but it seems like people out and about, they lose signal if they’re in the wrong spot.”

“Could it be something in the Dome?”

“At’s what I think. Not something jamming it necessarily, just something too dense to let a signal pass. You wouldn’t know what they’ve got in there.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Why you asking? Did you have trouble sending?”

“No, I just wondered. And also I thought you might be undercover surveillance.”

He guffawed. I'd made his day.

I walked back to the little group. The offended Julia was still holding forth.

“The kind of man who'd deliberately wear a tie if he had one,” she spat. Men have to be careful of offending women, ever since that feminist said a few years ago that men wear ties as a phallic symbol and might as well go around with zips undone. I only wear a tie to formal occasions and I ask ladies in my company if it offends them. Easy for me since I don't like wearing ties anyway, but many older men pay no heed to the controversy and continue as they always have.

Myron was frowning and nodding in agreement.

“Sorry I couldn't be more help,” I said, sitting down, catching the nice red-skinned Martian lad's eye for more coffee.

“No, you were great, Donal,” Saoirse assured me. “I felt better just having you there, you've so much experience. And it saved us wasting any more time on the guard.”

“I just wanted to ask the postie about reception,” I said as my coffee arrived.

“Oh, he's probably undercover surveillance,” said the Irish cultural attaché. “I meant to ask you, Donal, when you'll have another book out?”

“I'm researching for one,” I admitted. “I have to be careful what I write to avoid breaking any zine rules.”

“I really enjoyed your portrayal of the Irish community here.”

“Yeah, you and six others,” I muttered. I felt like an eejit as soon as I'd said it. Writers had to come across as successful and popular, or nobody would be interested in their works. My second self-published novel had taken a different tack, but it hadn't reached any bigger a readership. There were just too many books available on line. I plastered a smile on my face.

At the table behind me a girl got up and left, complaining that her pod wouldn't work here.

My mailer had a new mail when I put my tablet on the table. I read it as I sipped. Anto was asking the others about the interior of the Dome. Myron didn't ask anything; he knew I'd fill him in later.

“Don't attribute this to us,” I said, “but I've got a suggestion.”

They all stared.

“The building owners or renters around here, they may not be that kindly disposed towards the Jovians, right? Property prices dropped, crowds aren't coming to concerts anymore, Jovians don't

shop locally or use their services. The rooftops of a few of these buildings are above the Dome height, in a sort of semicircle. The river side I can't alter, but some of the roof-space owners might let you set up big floodlights and put green filters on them. Shine them on the Dome."

"Yes!" exclaimed young Anto.

The official delegates just stared at me, but Myron was used to me.

"And these good Irish folks won't get into trouble why?" he asked, assuming I had the answer.

"I've just done some research and I don't believe the Jovians can actually see the colour green. They think it's a yellowish whitish greyish tone depending on how dark a hue. The man we spoke with couldn't admit to a weakness or confusion in front of Earth people. They won't even notice."

"How could you research that?" asked Saoirse.

"Spectroscopic analysis," I said vaguely.

Myron gave a wise nod.

"Ow was the smell?" he asked.

"Foul," said Julia and Saoirse said "Disgusting" simultaneously. "What was it?" Julia asked us. "I thought I'd suffocate, I was trying to breathe so lightly."

"Methane," Myron explained, sitting back in his chair.

"There's a place near the South Bank studios that rents out floodlights," Anto told us happily, looking up from his tablet. You can hire just about anything in London. "Are we doing it?"

"Let's get started asking building tenants," said Julia. "See you tomorrow Donal, Myron? Thanks again."

When they'd gone and I settled to enjoy my coffee Myron chuckled.

"Our mate Abe?" he asked.

"Yep," I said.

"You have some interesting Irish friends."

I shrugged.

"Anto," said Myron. "He's invited us to go place hacking with him and his mates."

"We need a letter from you saying we're researching place hacking," we told our editor. At this time Angie was our immediate boss at *London's Eye*, a lady with a motherly build, lots of curly brown hair and a no-nonsense attitude which we probably well deserved. Angie's office was a small room at the zine building on the Isle of Dogs, just across the Thames to the north of Greenwich.

The zine was near the river in a former warehouse district, all now converted to light business and housing. Mostly we worked from home, which means coffee shops a lot of the time as these constitute the popular work environment of the day, but we could use the desks in the staffroom at any time and had to report in person at least once a week.

“Guys, you write features,” she reminded us. “You can do all the investigative stuff or colour pieces you want, but first get the features in to me.”

I set my tablet to her glass desk’s touchpoint and slipped six new feature articles into the files. She checked them over, tapping with a stylus while we sat patiently. Only a couple of minutes elapsed before she was satisfied, because she knew the quality of our work was good.

“I’m going to be away for a week, the zine’s sending me on a course. Birmingham. I could commute, but the high-speed rail costs as much as the hotel rate for the conference so the zine wants me to network while I’m there. The hubby will just have to cope. With what’s in the databank and a few of these the week should be nicely covered. What’s the worst trouble you could get into?”

We smiled and shrugged agreement.

“No, really. I need to know. What’s the worst trouble you could get into?”

“Ah,” said Myron. “The place hackers apparently have a code of ethics that says they don’t disturb anything, don’t take anything away or leave any litter. Usually they record the outing and place vid footage on the net. If they’re caught, yeah, there’s potential for arrest on grounds of trespass. But they’re not stripping roof lead, not hanging protest banners or invading privacy. They might be in jobs where they don’t want the boss to know, so they try not to be caught.”

“Why do they do this?” asked Angie, leaning on her elbows on her desk surface.

“That’s what we’ll be asking,” I said.

She gave it a moment’s consideration.

“I’ll write you covering letters. Print them out and bring the copies, in case your tablets stop working. But trespass is still trespass. Try to avoid breaking and entering. If in doubt talk to the lawyers. And if really in doubt – about safety, or anything – you don’t need to go.”

“Thanks,” we said.

“Our ratings are dropping, guys. Other zines are getting more site visits. We badly need a major story, something to get people involved enough to want to read it ahead of their friends and forward links, to come back to us for updates over a few days. That’s what pulls in the advertisers. Can I count on you to find us something out of the ordinary?”

“Sure you can.” We gave her encouraging smiles.

“While I’m away, one of the subs who is working up to a place as assistant editor will fill in. Don’t make his life too hard, will you?”

We donned our ‘who, us?’ faces.