

IMAGINARY SCENES

Next in our series on the World Wide Web, following our forensic examinations of Google and Ebay, is our chums at MySpac. I occasionally cruise this social networking site, and I'm reminded of the very first websites I would visit after we got the Internet, the Yahoo chat rooms. For the first couple of minutes I had a great time, meeting new people who said hello and welcomed me to their room. Then they said goodbye to some people who left. Then they said hello to some more people who arrived. And goodbye to someone else who left... After half an hour of this I posted a comment saying 'Hang on! You're just saying hello and goodbye to people! That's not terribly interesting!'... so they said goodbye to me.

We shouldn't forget that we at Imaginary Scenes have a MySpac website too. I don't think we're biting the hand the feeds us with this story, so much as gnashing our teeth at the hand that sometimes waves a banana under our nose. I don't think our MySpac website has done us any harm, and in general I'm not sure it's a harmful institution. What it has done is absorb plenty of time, and maybe that's the ultimate task of anything in this world.

So, fine, long may it continue to not cease to be.

World Wide Waffle 3

by SPYDA

Belinda Dewsbury, the wife of a soldier serving in Afghanistan, had been holding down the family home as well as her full-time position as a receptionist at a doctor's surgery for the past two years, and finally reaching a point where her nerves were so frayed by worry and the multifarious demands being made on her that she began to fear for her sanity, she agreed to send her teenage son Peter away to a summer camp in the US.

Peter was thrilled. Some of his friends had been to MyCamp, as it was known, the previous year, and had returned with tales of adventure and comradeship, relayed through nascent new world accents. When the information pack arrived, Peter scanned the photos for their faces, but without success.

Belinda telephoned the number on the pack and spoke to an affable supervisor, or 'camp counsellor' as he introduced himself. He was vague

World Wide Waffle 3

about the activities on offer, but he assured Belinda, enthusiastically and repeatedly, that Peter was 'certain to have a ball'. But when she asked whether he needed to bring anything – Peter was keen on climbing, for example, and he had plenty of equipment – something rather odd happened. There came a long silence on the line, thickening after a time into an odd rasping noise, not unlike wheezing, until quite suddenly the voice returned with the simple, 'Oh no. Peter won't need any of that.'

Five days after this conversation, Belinda, Peter and all Peter's brothers and sisters were standing on the docks at Southampton. Above them loomed a huge ocean liner, which MyCamp had commissioned to bring over its UK acolytes. The ship was so tall that Peter could only see the top deck by straining his neck backwards and squinting. When he did this he could just make out the tiny pinhead faces of those that had already boarded looking down at him. The ship blocked the low winter sun, casting the docks in a thin shadowless light as though it were dusk, even though it was only mid-afternoon. It gave an otherworldly aspect to the events happening on the docks: all the rituals of leave-taking appeared to be occurring in a thick syrup. Looking along the shoreline, Peter watched the small knots of humanity embracing and separating, waving, smiling and kissing, and he remembered when he had first come to the docks, either at Southampton or Plymouth, and watched the metal ship grow larger and larger and finally arrive, whereupon the crowds on the shore had erupted into cheers as all the men had disembarked in their uniforms and one of them had run and embraced his mother and lifted Peter high into the air and kissed him.

After a few minutes, a man in a white uniform approached Peter's small family group and addressed Peter in a bluff Yankee drawl.

'Peter, right?'

'Er, yeah.'

'Hi. I'm Tom.'

'Oh hi...'

World Wide Waffle 3

Peter reached out a hand to shake, but Tom's stayed glued to his clipboard. The older man smiled.

'Oh we don't bother with any of that. What should I call you – Pete? P-Dog? P-Man?'

'Oh... Peter is fine.'

Tom raised his eyebrows, as though Peter had just said the very last thing he would have expected anyone called Peter ever to say, but he wrote it down on the clipboard anyway. For his part, Peter suddenly wondered whether he'd made a mistake. Who, given the choice to pick another name for themselves, would pick the one they already had? Wasn't that like buying the same shirt twice? It would be useful to have an alternative name, and he could always change it again if he needed to.

'Actually... can you just call me P?' asked Peter.

'Sure!' said Tom, scribbling on his clipboard. After he had made the change, he put his pen in his shirt pocket and looked at his watch. 'You better get on board' he said, 'We're leaving any minute.'

**Who, given the choice to pick
another name for themselves,
would pick the
one they already had?**

And so, as his last act as the entity known as Peter, Peter embraced his mother, ruffled the hair of his siblings, picked up his bag and walked across the gangway to the enormous boat.

* * * * *

The voyage lasted three days. Such at least was the measure of time P spent on the boat, but at the end he couldn't sort the activities and events of the trip

World Wide Waffle 3

into three increments of twenty-four. He had made a few friends, drunk coffee with them and watched some funny films. He had walked on deck and looked across the vast churning sea at the empty horizon. He had slept a great deal during the night and day; he had eaten irregularly and badly. He had spent hours looking at the photos and testimonials from MyCamp that were posted everywhere on the ship and he and his fellow-travellers had watched again and again the short MyCamp video that played on a loop in the lounge, until P. felt that when he closed his eyes to go to sleep he could play the video through in his mind from beginning to end. Anticipation of the splendours of MyCamp had swelled in the heart of every passenger, so that everyone on board the ship, even the crew and staff, had become restless and impatient for land.

Yet the sight of the little white beach huts, going back in identical and parallel rows from the shoreline like little pointed dominos all lined up and ready to be toppled, was an oddly deflating one. It reminded P of the caravan parks of the South Coast so beloved of his grandmother, but always so depressing to the little boy called 'Peter'.

Up close, the huts were no more impressive. When Tom showed P his home for the summer, the new arrival smiled and tried to summon up some excitement for the plain little shed.

'Most MyCampers like to personalise their huts' said Tom. He pointed to a little pouch on the front door. 'You can stick a photo of yourself right here. Although actually it needn't be a photo of yourself exactly. It could be a movie star... or anything really! Some crazy people along your row have a picture of a hippo! Isn't that silly?!

P agreed that it was fairly silly.

'Inside, it's the same - totally up to you, kiddo. You can paint the hut any colour you like. We've got some paint back at the Center you can borrow when you're ready. We even have an interior design service, which is free to

World Wide Waffle 3

use. But you should have a look at some of the other huts to get some ideas first.'

P looked at the four whitewashed walls and tried to imagine how he might improve things. The problem was that the hut was so small that any colour at all would render the space horribly claustrophobic. It would be much better, P knew, to leave the thin coat of white paint undisturbed, but he smiled at Tom and said he would think about how he wanted the place. P was starting to feel a certain pressure from Tom to be creative, zany, rebellious even, and this worried P because he had always been a quiet boy, in class smiling at the jokes of the other boys, then at home carefully copying up his class notes and covering his school books with paper to save the edges, and preparing for exams which he hoped, at best, to pass with reasonable marks. Here at MyCamp, there seemed to be an expectation to perform in some way and he knew that in this he would certainly disappoint all the camp counsellors and his fellow MyCampers, because he was not a performer.

**P was starting to feel a certain
pressure from Tom to be
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'Well anyhow, I'll leave you to make yourself at home. See you later, crocodile'. Tom ducked through the small door.

'Cheerio' said P.

In trying to close the door after Tom, P couldn't help noticing that it jammed on the floor. The events of the next few minutes also revealed that the window didn't open, the bed had several broken springs and the pilot light in the small stove in the corner wouldn't come on. The room also contained a mystery object. This was a huge black square panel that almost covered one wall entirely. P felt along the edges for a knob or a switch to turn it on in case it was a piece of electrical equipment, but he found nothing. The object

World Wide Waffle 3

appeared to be nothing other than a completely smooth lump of wall-mounted granite.

P opened his trunk and laid out his few possessions on the dresser – a hairbrush, some deodorant, a few coins. He also had a small photograph of his father in uniform. He put this in the pouch on his front door, because it was the only picture he had thought to bring.

P then collapsed into bed, fatigued but happy.

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There came a knock on P's door, startling the sleeping MyCamper. The soft light in the room indicated that it was dusk, which meant that P must have been sleeping for at least three hours. He quickly swung out of bed and began to move in the half-light across the unfamiliar room. Before he reached the door, however, it opened of its own volition and the light came on, transforming the hut into a screechingly white capsule that momentarily blinded P.

'Whoa' came a voice. 'These walls are pretty intense. You should paint them, you know.'

**'Hi' said the young man, 'I'm
Json. Only, it's not spelled
J-A-S-O-N, but J-S-O-N.'**

A tall, gangly young man wearing a hooded top strode into P's hut. He had messy hair and was unshaven. On his T-shirt it read 'Atari Chi'.

'Hi' said the young man, 'I'm Json. Only, it's not spelled J-A-S-O-N, but J-S-O-N.'

'Hullo Json' said P. 'I'm P'.

World Wide Waffle 3

'Just P? Or do you spell it P-E-E?'

'No, no' said P, caught off guard by this unforeseen aspect to his new name.

'It's just P, as in, the letter P.'

'Well', said Json, 'that's kinda cool. I guess. Hey, did I mention I'm in a band?'

We're called Json and the Aga Noughts and we play a sort of hybrid ska, shuffle, two-step, thrash, Dixieland kind of thing. Would you like to hear some?'

'Sure – I think I've got a CD player over –'

But Json was already stationed in front of the mute black object on the wall. P watched as Json began to stroke his fingers deftly in different, seemingly random, places on the panel. Little red and green lights flickered across the sleek surface of the granite, and then suddenly the little whitewashed hut erupted into noise, which P could only assume was Json and the Aga Noughts.

It didn't sound like any music P had ever heard before. It sounded like someone had taken three or four records and was playing them all at the same time.

**P's hut and everything in it
was subsumed in a low
throbbing electronic gargle**

'Do you like it?' shouted Json, above the din.

'I think so' said P.

'A lotta people don't really know what to make of it when they first hear it' said Json. 'Because it's so original. It's like when people first heard the Beatles, and they'd be like, "What is THIS?"'

'Yes' said P, struggling to hear Json.

'I always tell people they need to listen to the record every day, for like a month, and then it will start to make sense to them.'

'Yes, I can see that'.

Json was nodding his head in time to the music and singing along with the other Json, the Json in the black panel. P was beginning to worry that Json had used his mastery of the entertainment system to programme the black panel to play Json and the Aga Noughts every day for a month. He was by no means sure he wanted to listen to Json and the Aga Noughts again.

At that moment, another young man entered P's tiny hut. Like Json, he was very tall and unshaven and wore a hooded top. On his T-shirt it said, 'Ipod therefore I am'.

'Hi' he said. 'I'm BONES_13. That's bones in capital letters, underscore, then 'thirteen' in numerals.'

'I'm P' said P.

'And I'm Json' said Json.

'Json was just playing me a record of his' said P. 'Json's in a band called Json and the Aga Noughts.'

BONES_13 raised his eyebrows.

'No shit? I'm in a band too, actually. We're called 'Motel Daycare' and our sound is a sort of emo slash indie slash post-grunge slash hardcore slash Dixieland thing. Do you want to hear some?'

'Well, I – '

But of course it was too late. The red and green lights flickered momentarily across the black panel, before P's hut and everything in it was subsumed in a low throbbing electronic gargle.

* * * * *

Just as the first rays of light completed their daily commute from the sun to MyCamp, where they softly alighted on the apex of P's hut, P leaned heavily against his door to overcome the jam and fell into his badly sprung bed.

In his head, he could still hear the wailing banjos and throbbing bass of the last band he had been asked to listen to, The Stickz. Now, thought P hazily, The Stickz was Sa11uel's band... or was it The Passionfruit's? Both produced Acid Bluegrass, but one of those bands was definitely better than the other. Although even the weaker of the two was more bearable than Shugar N Spyce, that awful collaboration between The Artist Formerly Known and tt110. And then there was the interesting but somewhat painful experimentation of CaptainLenin, the 'prog Baroque' of Atlas aka Music101, the hardcore bop of CarrierPigeon and, somewhere on the other side of that great ocean of noise, the low throbbing electronic gargle of Motel Daycare.

It was odd, thought P, that such a varied series of sounds should come from a set of men who seemed so alike and so normal. They each had only one peculiarity: their somewhat fragile and binary modes of being. On the one hand, they were desperate for P's good opinion of their music, and on the other, openly pleased with their work to the point of arrogance. They reminded P of children presenting their parents with their little stick drawings.

P smiled. They were nice guys, those unshaven Yankee-doodlers, and what's more, they were his friends.

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P was awoken by a low throbbing electronic gargle. He opened one eye, and saw BONES_13 sitting by the bed. BONES_13 was wearing a hooded top and a T-shirt that read 'Any old dream won't do.'

'Hey' he said. 'Welcome back to the land of the living'.

'What time is it?'

There was no clock in P's hut.

'It's a quarter after three. You've been asleep for like, the whole day.'

World Wide Waffle 3

'Quarter past three' translated P, wonderingly. He didn't think he had slept that late since being a baby.

'Hey' said BONES_13 again. 'Do you like this tune? It's called "I used to love you before I discovered what kind of person you are and also what love really means".'

'I think it's good.'

'Yeah, it is good.'

P found that he was still wearing his jeans under the bedclothes, so he pulled back the covers and swung his legs out of bed. He wasn't going to change his trousers today anyway. What on earth would BONES_13, Json and The Artist Formerly Known make of his corduroy ones?

'So, me and my friend Ali Gate Or – that's three words, A-L-I and then another word, gate, G-A-T-E and then or, O-R, Ali Gate Or – me and my friend Ali Gate Or are going to play Striplets today, do you want to come play with us?' 'Striplets' said P, thoughtfully. 'Is that one of your songs?'

BONES_13 laughed.

'No, man! But actually, it's a pretty good name for a song, thanks for that. No no, it's a game. It's one of the games we play here at MyCamp.'

P agreed to play the game and thanked BONES_13 for inviting him. The pair left P's hut and zigzagged their way through the rows of identical white dwellings towards the MyCamp Center. There was a festival atmosphere, with people sitting in deckchairs outside their huts, or entertaining their friends with their music or videos inside. Loud music emanated from almost every doorway. On occasion, P thought he recognised a song, and if the tenant of the hut were around, he would glance quickly at him, to see whether it was Sa11uel or maybe tt110. But of course, all his new friends had changed their clothes since the night before, and a different set of slogan T-shirts and

World Wide Waffle 3

hooded tops quite precluded P from making any definite identification. The MyCampers were just too similar in appearance.

It occurred to P that maybe it was this similarity in bodily appearance that made the MyCampers so keen to decorate their huts in wildly different ways. Peering at every little home as he walked past was like peeking into a series of contained explosions of colour: loud, garish blues, greens and reds swirled around the walls of many huts; others were covered in posters of movie stars or countless family snaps stuck willy-nilly on top of each other; in a few, P saw that instead of painting or decorating their huts, the MyCampers had stacked dozens of TV screens and hi-fi equipment along the walls, and in the small gaps left between the cables the TVs blazed away, competing with one another for the attention of the MyCampers – which was often a completely futile exercise because the MyCampers would be sat in deckchairs outside the hut, drinking beer, chatting, and seemingly unaware of the electronic furore taking place over their shoulders.

**It made him wonder again
whether he oughtn't to be more
like his fellow MyCampers –
more different**

The one decoration scheme that P did not encounter anywhere on the long walk to the Center was his own – of plain white walls and plain white floorboards. It made him wonder again whether he oughtn't to be more like his fellow MyCampers – more outlandish and crazy, more different.

In a huge forecourt in front of the MyCamp Center, about twenty people were engaged in an activity that P came to know as 'Striplets'. It wasn't, strictly speaking, a game, since there were no winners or losers, no method of accruing points, and no agreed point at which the activity came to an end. Each Striplets player held a long stick with a small fork at the end. They walked slowly and haphazardly across the forecourt, with their arms straight,

World Wide Waffle 3

holding their sticks high in the air like rigid kites. When P looked up, he saw that balanced on the forks of these sticks, high in the air, were little tube-like objects that rippled and swayed in the breeze. They looked like snakes, but they were longer and colourless.

‘Those are the triplets up there’ said BONES_13. ‘You have to keep them in the air as long as you can. It’s not as easy as it looks!’

It didn’t look that easy to P. The triplets wiggled and swung about, often slipping through the forks altogether, whereupon they floated gently to the ground. To avoid this happening, the players focussed their whole beings onto the little triplets high in the air – in fact, P realised, they only wandered forwards and backwards across the forecourt to try and counteract a momentum in the tube to slip out. Such was the complete absorption of each player in his triplet, floating uncertainly twenty feet above him, that P saw the players crash into each other two or three times, which of course meant the game was immediately over for both. At other times, triplets became entangled in the air, the long sticks smacking against each other with a pleasant *chonk* sound. When this happened, P observed that there would sometimes be tension between the players on the ground, who would blame one another for trespassing in their area, or playing recklessly.

P stared upwards, transfixed by the endlessly changing constellation of tubes against the bright afternoon sky. It was while he was watching that someone took his hand, opened the palm, and wordlessly placed a smooth triplet stick in it.

‘Hey’ said a girl standing in front of him. ‘You looked like you wanted to have a go. I’m done now so you can use my stick.’

‘Thanks’ said P. He handled the stick rather uncertainly and smiled with embarrassment. The girl, who was small and dark-featured but who had a shock of pink hair at the front, stood and watched him for a few seconds.

‘You want me to show you how?’ she said.

‘If that’s not too much trouble’ said P.

World Wide Waffle 3

'No trouble at all' said the girl, in such a way that P could be in no doubt that she was being honest. And she showed P how to temporarily fix the striplet to the fork of the stick, where it would hold long enough to be hoisted into the air.

On P's first attempt to raise his stick, the striplet immediately unravelled and tumbled down almost on top of the pair. Laughing, the girl picked the thing up and fixed it once more on the end of P's stick. On his second attempt, P managed to hold the striplet for minutes on end, and the girl, whose name P discovered was LuSee, stood at his shoulder and brushed her pink hair from her eyes and watched and said after a short while, 'Wow! You're a real natural!'

* * * * *

Dear Dad,

I hope you are doing OK. I got your letter the other day with the pictures. I've stuck them on the walls of my little hut so that everyone can see them. I only had one picture of you before, and my friends would always ask who you were, so they'll be interested to see some more.

It looks really hot where you are. It's quite hot here too, although it rained yesterday.

I'm sorry to hear about the problems you've been having with equipment and communications. Stuff like that is really important. Do people further up the line of command realise the situation? If they do, I can't understand why they don't sort it out.

You asked me about my life here in MyCamp. Well, it's really cool. Every MyCamper has their own hut that they can decorate any way they like. And there basically aren't any rules, for example you don't have to go to bed at a certain time or do lessons or anything. I spend a lot of time hanging out with my friends, listening to their music and playing games. There are special

World Wide Waffle 3

MyCamp games that we play. One is called Striplets, which I'm really good at. You have to hold this thing called a 'striplet' on the end of a stick for as long as you can. It's not as easy as it sounds, especially on a windy day. Another game is called 'Colorsmash' and this is like paintballing, where you use a gun to fire little balls of paint at each other. Except in Colorsmash you don't fire the paint at each other, everyone just fires it at a big white wall. And everyone has different colours in their gun so by the end the wall looks really cool and you can take pictures of it.

And there are other games too, but those are my favourites. I spend maybe two hours a day playing Striplets and I play Colorsmash once or twice a week.

I have quite a lot of friends already – 87 friends. But every day I make more friends, so by the time you get this letter I may even have a hundred. My best friend is probably BONES_13, who I met on my first day and who taught me to play Striplets. He's from New York State, which he says is as far away from MyCamp as England is, because America is so big. Also, I've got a girlfriend now. She's called LuSee and originally she's from Nevada. I'm sending you a photo of her and me with this letter. We celebrated our three-week anniversary on Saturday.

You asked if I've heard from mum. I had a message from MyCamp center to say that she's been trying to call me. Maybe she's forgotten we don't have phones in our huts. Anyway, I guess I should call her or write or something. This is the first letter I've written since I came here. I can't believe that it's been a month already! It's gone really quick.

When does your current posting end? Is it September?

Anyway, take it easy Dad and write again soon

Lots of love

P (Peter)

PS – I'm sorry I can't send you a Yorkie Bar, but they don't sell English chocolates in MyCamp center. So instead I'm sending you a Hershey Bar, which is American. I hope it doesn't melt before it gets to you.

* * * * *

At last the day came when the great ship that had brought P and his compatriots to MyCamp reappeared on the horizon. The little black knot on the great plane of blue was the only sign that it was time for the British MyCampers to gather their things and say goodbye to their new friends. They had a full two days to do this, since the boat was still a great way off when it was first seen. So on the final night, with the lights of the ship twinkling in the bay, the MyCampers threw a huge party, in which every band performed live in front of the other bands, and there was much drinking and laughing and crying. Many wept with pain and grief at the impending schism in the camp as they would if they knew they were about to lose one of their own limbs. Others were more positive: wet-cheeked, they sat by the fire and made heartfelt promises to come again, to write, to remember.

**MyCamp settled into state of
fuzzy contentment**

The following day, P stood on the cliffs with BONES_13 and LuSee to watch the embarkation. He remembered how large the boat had seemed at Southampton. From his viewpoint on the cliffs, it seemed barely large enough to contain the passengers. The trio sat down in the long grass, and P held LuSee's hand as the liner sounded its horn and began its slow journey away from the sunset.

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World Wide Waffle 3

As the Summer waned, MyCamp settled into state of fuzzy contentment. Although it was sad to see the derelict huts of the campers who had left, they had taken with them a feeling of ticking impermanence that had somehow undermined what the place had to offer the human soul. When they left, the weight of time was lifted, as though they had taken with them all the clocks in America.

So it was a measureless space of time after P had sat in the long grass and heard the ship's foghorn, that he received a letter from his mother. She had gone down to Southampton to meet the ship, and when P didn't appear on the docks, had torn through the corridors and cabins in sharply increasing panic. At last, in the captain's dining room, she had encountered Tom drinking a glass of port and he had informed her with a smile that 'P's gonna stick around for a while'.

P was almost ready to send the letter when LuSee told him that she had missed her period

The letter she wrote to P was by turns indignant, poignant and pleading. P read it once, folded it carefully back into its envelope, and began a reply on a series of postcards, which was the only kind of writing material available at MyCamp.

P was almost ready to send the letter when LuSee told him that she had missed her period. Therefore, P decided to wait so that he might include in his letter the sex and name of the baby. After what seemed an impossibly short confinement, LuSee had a little girl and she and P decided to call it Jo4n.

P wrote about his little daughter on a fresh postcard to his mother. He was on the point of bundling it together with the previous cards and posting the lot, when he won his first major Striplets championship.

World Wide Waffle 3

(His new role of father had forced P to think of the future, and he now practised Stripleets for seven hours a day to put food on the table for LuSee and Jo4n. When he wasn't practising, he was listening to Motel Daycare records or writing postcards to his mother.)

The stack of postcards grew and grew, but circumstances continued to interrupt with more news to impart, and so P was never quite ready to send the letter. One day, while LuSee was pregnant again, she gathered all the postcards together and put them in a special cabinet. It was designed in a clever way, with a slot at the top, like a ballot box. Now all P had to do was drop new postcards into the slot, and they would fall to the top of the pile inside.

So P posted into this slot a card about Jo4n's new band, which was called Third Nature, and which played what his daughter called 'deep Dixieland'. He posted a card about his son, BONES_14, who was named after his great friend. He posted another card when the boy made his Colorsmash debut and included a picture of the boy's wall.

For a long time, P kept the key to the cabinet in a little cup on the windowsill of his hut. He thought that one day he would unlock the cabinet and box all of the postcards together to be shipped to his mother. But the time was never quite right, and although P continued to post into the little slot cards that described every aspect of his family's life, the key remained in the little cup on the windowsill for years and years. Then one day, while he was trying to fix the window, which still wouldn't open properly, P saw that the key had disappeared.

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