

## My Fair London

This note is a little late coming out because I just got back from London last night. I was exceedingly lucky to have been invited over for my upcoming birthday, to celebrate with my best friend Kathleen and some of her friends, including a girl whose birthday is five days before mine. We're both turning the big 3-0 in a matter of weeks! It's been funny getting used to saying my birthdate over here--after a lifetime of rattling off "11-18," I have to stop to think before cautiously saying "18-11?"

The mad adventure started at 5 am on Saturday morning, a time when even Dan is usually peacefully asleep in bed. Between the excitement of the upcoming trip and the students yelling in the street at 2 in the morning, I hadn't slept much (a trend that would hold for the whole weekend.) Dan dragged me out of bed and bundled me into the car, and we set off for the Belfast airport. Now, an hour and a bit's journey doesn't sound like much, especially for those Bay Area residents. Try to imagine, however, this length of a journey in the pitch dark, broken only by the oncoming high beams of approaching cars, on windy roads, some not much more than one lane! The new motorway isn't quite completed up Belfast way. At one point, we thought we saw the sun start to rise, only to be confounded by the sight of the colors disappearing again as the dark sky started pouring rain. We did get to the airport on time, and my reservation in my maiden name was accepted by the airline without resorting to my marriage cert. Both times checking in on this trip, though, there was excitement at the desk immediately to my left. Leaving Belfast, a man attempted to check in next to me with a fully loaded weapon. How did I know this? Well, the PSNI officer told him to empty it, and the bullets flew all over the floor! It was actually a friendly conversation between the two--the man was apologizing all over himself for "forgetting." Leaving London, there was a couple next to me attempting to fly, but the woman was pregnant. Easyjet has a policy that if you are over 25 weeks pregnant, you can't fly without written permission from a doctor. They had flown out for the weekend, with no mention of the policy, but were now being denied their return trip because of the restriction. Their only option was to go into Gatwick and see a doctor at the walk-in clinic. They were very distressed; it was a sad sight.

The flight was easy enough--imagine getting to London in an hour and 15 minutes! With no jet lag. Ahhhh... I had a great seat mate, originally from N. Ireland, who was returning to her home in South Africa. She told me about the terrible drought there. No one is permitted to water a garden, and they collect any water in big barrels to use for flushing toilets. Her kids have to share the same bathwater. All construction has come to a complete halt, as they can't use precious water for making cement. Her daughter is addicted to reading, so I had fun recommending some titles. When we arrived in London Gatwick, they took our photos and attached a barcode to our landing cards because we were about to "mix with domestic passengers." I'm still not sure about why that's a problem. When we handed in our cards before getting our baggage, the pictures popped up once again on the computer screens--quick system. I took the wrong train from the airport at first, but realized at the next stop. I finally arrived in London, dropped off my bag at the hotel, and set off to try to make a matinee of *I Am My Own Wife*. It's a transfer from the States, which I'd missed in Dublin. Because it was opening weekend, we were all given a string of fake pearls at the door. It was quite amusing to see the guys all wearing them too. The show is the story of a transvestite who survived under the Nazis and the Communists in East Berlin. She/He collected antiques and kept sort of a museum, where she conducted tours of her collection. It was an interesting story, but not quite the gripping piece of theatre it could have been. I enjoyed it, though, and had time to stop in just before at the National Picture Gallery across the street to say hello to Richard III.

I met Kathleen back at the hotel, and we set off for noodles before going to a concert at the Barbican, where the other birthday girl, Paola, was playing for a dance concert. Probably the less said about the first half of the concert, the better! It was really loud, recorded, repetitious rock music and odd choreography on a black & white striped floor. I had to plug my "buzzy" ear for the whole first half, which was mercifully only 25 minutes long. The second half was great: the

orchestra played Stravinsky and the dancers told an interesting story of isolation, courtship, and its aftermath. After the concert (where we were able to wave to Paola in the pit from the top gallery!) there was a reception down innumerable flights of stairs in the pit. Tasty hummus, baklava-type sweets, dates on the branch, and even Turkish delight were offered, as well as champagne and really excellent mild feta (?) cheese & olives. We left there around 10:30, when the music was switched off, lights were switched on, and the champagne stopped flowing. We reconvened at a lesbian club, which was certainly an interesting experience! It was very smoky, though, and Kathleen and I were feeling ill from it all. It's amazing how you can get used to no smoking--Ireland has the same ban as California now. After we navigated our way thru the evil night bus system to our hotel in Russell Square, it was 3 am and the showers were COLD. At least, we were able to get most of the smoke off ourselves.

On Sunday, somehow we managed to wake up at 8:20, in time for the full English breakfast at the hotel. We set off for a "nice, relaxing day" wandering my old haunts in South Kensington. We stopped for a tasty mocha and crossaint (I know, after those breakfasts??) at a new cafe before buying peanuts and heading to the Gardens. We fed the squirrels and the big native wood pigeons (who can swallow an entire peanut, with shell, WHOLE.) I got some cute pictures of Kathleen enticing the squirrels up onto her jacket to get the food. We walked all over the park, then tried to get back on the tube, but the station was shut. So, we tried the bus. Two passed us up, but finally one gave us a lift closer to the Notting Hill station. By this time, we were pretty tired. However, nothing could finish off the day properly like a Bosphorus Kebab (the best kebabs in London) so we took 15 minutes out to share one. When we got back to the hotel, Kathleen fell asleep almost immediately, and I read for an hour or so. We met up with the crew around 6pm and went off to Brick Lane in search of the perfect curry. We found an amazing one (after ignoring the pouncing restaurant touters) and had the best best meal ever, where we made loud nuisances of ourselves laughing and talking for longer than an hour after the meal.

Monday morning we were up at 7, off to the tube, and back to airport. Kathleen headed for Baltimore via Heathrow, and I came back to Belfast to spend the day with the cousins until Dan got off work and could make it up there. I am tired and a little stuffy now, but such a time we had!

I have started teaching our landlord's three girls music on Friday afternoons. Unfortunately, only one studies violin. So, I must be off to find tin whistle tunes and theory worksheets for the other two! Hope all is well with you and yours.

Love from cold-fingers-ville,

Heather