

They Made Me Do It

A perzine by Max

Summer 2002

What's this then?

It's a fanzine and the title says it all, really. If you received this unexpectedly then it's most likely because you're on *The Cosmic Hairdryer* mailing list. Some of you weren't on there before but you are now and should another *Cosmic Hairdryer* happen then you can receive and LoC it and all that good stuff. Meanwhile, I've been spewing content onto the internet, LiveJournal being utterly perfect for letting me churn out an article as and when I felt like it, be it in depth and researched or just thrown onto the screen.

People started asking to publish some of the pieces I'd given more thought to. That's why you'll find me in the next *Banana Wings*, the last *Velleity* and something I don't even know the title of that's coming from Randy Byers and Andy Hooper in the near future. Some of it wasn't grabbed, though, it just sat there. Suited me fine, no further effort involved. Writing is what I do, it's nice to have an audience for it and if it's all forgotten when it scrolls off the page, well, does it matter?

Well, according to Mark and Claire and Tony Keen, yes, it matters. These pieces need a wider audience, they say. Publish a fanzine, they insisted. Now, they told me. So here it is. *The Cosmic Hairdryer* was never meant to be a perzine, these bits of writing don't belong in there. I have started a run of a new perzine called *Max-A-Zine* but that's really just an umbrella name for any one offs and short bits I put together. It will encompass any APA pieces, quick zines thrown together at conventions and the likes. These pieces are too long to go in there. So they're here in a zine that may never see another issue, that won't be publishing a LoC column (though LoCs are still encouraged), and which doesn't worry about clever layouts, illustrations and so forth. It's a simple showcase of some of my personal articles so they can reach that wider audience. It's all Claire, Mark and Tony's fault. *They Made Me Do It*.

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Hedgehog

There's a dead hedgehog in the gutter of my road. I saw it the morning it was squashed, flattened and guts splattered across the road, red and grey. It was a quiet morning, not much traffic goes along the street, so it must have met a quite surprising end. I used to think that the motorists running over hedgehogs probably wound up with punctures, but it's unlikely.

The thing about hedgehogs is they don't decompose very well. The crow that a cat or fox had attacked and taken down was largely gone the day after I first saw it. Swarms of flies and ants see to that, though I've never figured out where the bones go. I guess the feathers are blown away. But the spiney skin of a hedgehog sits around for a good while and it's there in the gutter now, over a week later, looking sorry and grubby.

They warn you not to touch hedgehogs. Flea ridden, they say. But the little snuffling creatures are fascinating to watch, with their surprisingly fast waddles across the garden and odd little grunts to one another. You should give them cat food. The traditional bread soaked in milk is bad for them. So they say. In America and Canada you can get them as pets but I've never known anyone try to tame them in the UK since we found one in our back garden that didn't want to go away.

That was an early taste of death. The cute little creature that became less and less likely to curl up when approached seemed to be getting to know us. In fact it was just getting weaker and weaker as the days passed. I learnt later that we should have realised when it was awake during daylight hours that something was wrong. But I was ten and the prospect of a hedgehog as a pet was the easier way of looking at it. Until I came back from the library and found it dead one day.

"Are you sure it's not asleep?" my mum asked. I recalled the macabre vision of the lips pulled back over the teeth, the open staring eyes and the odd position of the hedgehog on its back but not curled up at all. There were flies already collecting around it.

We weren't allowed to bury it in the garden. My stepdad decided it wasn't appropriate. I don't know why. You don't question these things. We carried the body around to some bushes at the back of the houses and I visited every couple of days, watching it shrink away, fascinated. That's how I know about the decomposition thing. It's a slow process. It took all summer until eventually there were spines and bones and then, oddly, nothing.

I was upset by the death but intrigued by what followed. It's still the same. So animals die - of course they do. When I see dead creatures on the roadside now I think of taxidermy and the cycle of life and the slow process of decomposition. I think of that hedgehog and hedgehog flavoured crisps and Sonic and fleas and death and my mind grasshoppers around from subject to subject. And sometimes I write it down.

<Plokta.con 2.0>, the Comfort Zone, and Me

I may have been engaged in substance abuse for the last four days; it depends on whether you'd term sleep (or lack, thereof) a substance.

Cue sappy Aerosmith lyrics:

(imagine an expectant pause as the audience watches Noel fiddle with the sound system)

Don't wanna close my eyes, Don't wanna fall asleep, yeah, I don't wanna miss a thing.

Sappy and cloying or otherwise, that pretty much sums it up.

As a measure of the success of Plokta.con 2.0 consider this:

Friday night I went to bed at around 2.30am. The bar staff had left by arrangement with the Cabal and people were disappearing fast until I gave up and retired. Saturday night saw me going to bed at around 4am and Sunday night I didn't sleep. I got up at around 8.30am except on Monday morning when I went to bed at around 8.30am instead for a couple of hours. Don't bother to tot it up: it comes to around four hours a night. At 3am Tuesday morning I went to my room and scribbled notes briefly before going to bed until 8, upping my average slightly.

I'm sitting at home now. The keyboard clatter is the loudest thing in the room. My case is sitting in the hallway, still full of everything I shoved into it this morning before abandoning my hotel room. The living room is a mess with the ironing board out because I was putting transfers on T shirts last Thursday, and the laptop out because I was transferring photos of the con off it this afternoon. There's nobody here but me and I almost feel lonely. Almost.

The convention is still with me. I'm still feeling the buzz and I know that a week from now that buzz will be subdued and many of the memories will slip from my mind. Two weeks from now the whole thing will be nothing more than a memory of a high that is gone. Unless I write it down I will forget where I was at what point. Which programme items did I attend? Who did I eat with? Who said what, exactly? But it doesn't matter. Even when the high has gone and the memories need prompts to emerge some of this weekend is going to stay with me and the big thing about those late night sessions is they were relationship building. The friendships will largely endure, I expect, and ten years from now I can join in all those conversations that start with "Is it really ten years since Plokta 2? I must have known you about twelve years now, then!"

This is my fourth comfortable convention and in terms of comfort each has built on the previous one. Novacon 31, Corflu 19, Damn Fine Con and Plokta.con 2.0. Fandom has well and truly taken hold of me and I'm now quite settled in the comfort zone. It's a symbiotic thing, apparently. I'm told I'm bringing energy to the forums I invade. I can't

help but feel a little smug at this. Then guilty at feeling smug. Then the guilt diminishes with the realisation that people like me and I like being here and what the hell is wrong with that?

I want to talk some more about the comfort zone and how I found it through the medium of interpretive dance a con report. Fandom has helped me figure out who I am. It turns out I'm me. Kind of handy, that. Especially in those cases where somebody wanders up to me and opens the conversation with, "So you're Max!".

I talked to Claire about this and developed a suitable response. I'd been going with a suspicious and questioning, "Ye-es?" but we've decided that in future I should answer in the affirmative and hop onto a unicycle. In the absence of a unicycle fit for purpose in the vicinity I should just mention that I have one at home (which I do). I was quite prepared to go with this since Geri Sullivan had mentioned on a mailing list that she was "looking forward to meeting Max and other fen I haven't yet met" but the unicycle plan was trumped by appropriating one of Tanya's birthday gifts to Claire. I was able to present it in response to the first in-person greeting: "Ah, you're Max!" "Yes. Would you like a chocolate covered cricket?"

The other side of first time greetings is the aspect of concern in the aftermath. Yes, these people were all very nice to you when the person who knew who you were did the introductions. Yes, they bought you a drink when they were getting a round in. Yes, they even remember who you are the next time you're in their company. But that doesn't mean they like you, does it? It doesn't mean they're not just being polite and wishing you'd go away and let them carry on talking about things you don't understand. That's how it feels to be outside the comfort zone. That's why after I initially started going to the First Thursday meetings I stopped again for a while before coming back. It's the reason that although I knew Claire and Mark I didn't want to go and seat myself at their table without being invited for a long while. It's all quite different now. Friday night (after they emerge from sleeping off the jetlag from the trip from Croydon to Basingstoke) I shared this with them. Claire said, "You're daft, you are".

These days people know who I am and sometimes invite me to join them. I've also picked up the Magic Attraction Force which probably has another name and is probably a recognised phenomenon but it works like this: You walk into a half full bar at a convention. You sit at an empty table and observe what happens next. I did this at Novacon - four comfort positions ago - and wound up sitting alone for an hour or two (it wasn't that bad, I was scribbling an article at the time). I did this several times at Plokta and people came and sat with me. It's a small thing, but it speaks volumes.

Dave Hicks came up and practically took on the role of Official Welcoming Committee For Fandom. The main point he made was that it was good to see someone new on the scene fit in so well and so quickly. Not so quickly as he thought, in fact. I had to remind him that we met at Second (five comfort positions ago) where we sat at the same table one evening while he and Yvonne Rowse chatted about the ways and foibles of fanartists. Sue Mason made the same point, thinking we hadn't met when she sat with me at the

exact same table at Second. Dave nodded and smiled when I corrected him, accepted a drink and we wandered out together to sit in the sun with Lilian, Tanya and Tony. Lilian tells me it's good to have got to know me in person as well as online. Four comfort positions ago we sat at the same tables at Novacon and she didn't even notice.

I don't blame them in the slightest. The comfort notches correlate with the shyness factor. At Plokta I'm happy to leap up and display my prowess in an egg and spoon race. I'm willing (though a little less happy) to take an active part in organising a Cult of LiveJournal programme item. (We should have rehearsed more, we know, but the consensus appears to be that it worked well enough to be thoroughly entertaining.) I'm asked to take part in a panel item - Death of the Frequent Fanzine and I accept cheerfully. I sit there quietly in front of the audience, listening and taking things in. Eventually Tony makes a point and continues, "... and I'm saying this partially to bring you into the conversation, Max, as I'm aware you haven't really said anything yet...". But that's not a case of discomfort, I'm still well within the comfort zone listening and absorbing and getting ready to be vociferous if anybody says something I disagree with. I oblige with some comments. We start to wind down the panel but it's a slow process. My phone rings. On the other end of the line is Alison Freebairn. I take the perfect opportunity that is presenting itself and say to my friend, "Hello, you've just ended our panel." The audience laughs and departs. The important parts of the preceding sentences are "friend" and "laughs". These are important things to have.

I don't need an audience or a table to feel welcome. When I arrived at Plokta there were people sat outside the hotel and before I've even paid the taxi driver Anders is kissing my hand and babbling about LiveJournal and people are offering me a seat. They weren't even the people who were waiting eagerly for the Buffy tapes I'd brought with me for loan.

I guess that helps: Being willing and eager to share, to join in, to offer. Even the simplest things make a difference. As I sat at breakfast, nearing the point where I planned to leave the table I was joined (Magic Attraction Force in action again) by Jae Leslie Adams and Yvonne Rowse. Jae realised she hadn't collected toast and that were she to go and use the toasting conveyer belt the hotel supplied then the rest of her food would go cold. I offered to go and get toast for the new arrivals since I was done and I was thanked and greeted with comments along the lines of, "Oh she's so NICE isn't she?!". Well, I suppose so, but it's not difficult.

I treat people how I want to be treated. I do stuff that people appreciate if it's not going to inconvenience me and sometimes even if it does inconvenience me. I cheerfully admit that I will often put myself first, though, because (I've used this phrase before but I like it) I am the most important person in my life. I am the person who is always going to be here, the constant while everything changes. So I've learnt to be comfortable with that person. I know who I am, I'm me and I like her. The best bit, though, is where everyone else turns out to like her too.

There was a discussion one evening and at one point, in response to a comment about somebody's low self esteem the following phrase was uttered, "He's a fan, we ALL have self esteem issues." While there was a general acceptance of the comment I found myself saying, "I don't. You guys make it kind of hard for me to have self esteem issues, these days." I think there was a laugh or two. Alison Scott stared at me and I was sure she was about to comment but the comment didn't come. Perhaps she didn't want to make whatever comment she was considering, perhaps her mind was actually elsewhere at the time but it struck me that perhaps I am unusual in that respect. It fits in with comments such as that I overheard on Sunday evening when the person speaking had apparently failed to notice I was sitting right next to her and I'm not actually deaf. "Max is kind of weird, but weird in a good way."

If I'm weird, I don't care any more. I wandered into John Meaney's guest of honor talk when it was partway through. I hadn't really planned to attend as I've not read anything of his and may not get around to it for some time. I am pleased I did, though, he made me think as he talked about the different personalities and voices we carry around with us. There's the confident one, and the creative one and the uncertain one and the critic and the boast and the cynic and all the rest. What he was saying made a lot of sense to me and through that and through talking to Claire during a swim in the all-too-small pool at the hotel about her article on personal writing I managed to crystalise some of my thoughts about it. Moving into the comfort zone has been all about bringing out the me who Just Doesn't Care What You Think. Of course, she only found the confidence to emerge when she realised that she was liked by a few people so perhaps she's really Just Doesn't Care What You Think (Much) me. That doesn't mean that confidence boosts and ego massages aren't welcome. Flicking through the crop of fanzines available at this con left me surprised and pleased at just how many mentions I had. Another personal coup may seem insignificant. Alison Scott talked about how badly she tends to remember comments and how she often fails to attribute them to the right person. "Do you think it's important to get the phrasing right?" she asked me after I told her how I tend to remember or forget but rarely half remember a phrase. It's a throwaway question, it doesn't really matter what I think on the subject (potted opinion: It CAN matter as phrasing can influence the exact intent and if you realise a writer is paraphrasing some points it can detract from putting absolute faith in the reportship in general, but in much fan writing it's largely unimportant) but this was Alison asking me. Alison, who has been doing the whole fan writing thing far longer than I have, who has offered me advice on everything from dealing with the ignorant on trains to handling delivery companies. Alison who oozes confidence, wears a "Bossy Clanger" con badge and is known to *The Convertible Bus* readership as one of the scary women in fandom. And she's asking my opinion on this.

Over the course of the weekend I am congratulated on my photography, my writing, my choice of dressing-up-for-Bollywood-night costume and my skill with an egg-and-spoon. My phone earns me extra kudos when it goes off during the closing ceremony. A book is being auctioned. "Two pound fifty, do I have any advance on two pound fifty? Oh! We have a phone vote over here." It's Tobes, responding to my "Congratulations, you won TAFF" text message. He talks to Alison who relays messages back and forth for a while.

You couldn't set up two perfectly timed phonecalls if you tried, my hat is off to Alison Freebairn and Tobes on their impeccable timing skills.

All weekend I wander from group to group easily, breaking my "Find someone to talk to and talk to them all night long" habit. I get to know a lot of people tremendously better than I did before. We compress weeks worth of comments into a night spent avoiding sleep and sitting in the bar until breakfast time. I meet people for the first time, people who previously haven't noticed me now do.

I suppose I'm starting to believe my own hype, which can be dangerous. But I'm aware of that and I'm hoping I can live up to it. Meanwhile Plokta.con has catapulted me further into the comfort zone and I can't help but mark it as a first rate convention. The countdown to Novacon starts here.

Z 104

It's bittersweet, sitting here listening to the station I discovered over there.

When I arrived Nic grabbed my suitcase, Bobbie observed how tired I looked, they warned me to brace myself for the heat

"You're well over-dressed"

"Yeah, well it's not like this over there"

and then we walked out of the airport to the car.

Parking at airports doesn't come cheap and we were out of there fast and onto the beltway. They wound the windows down a little, lit cigarettes and cranked up The Z on the stereo, singing along to "Every day" (somehow dropping the V from each instance of "every"). Reclining in the back seat as we darted through the aggressively driven vehicles I watched the sun stream down on America and enjoyed the novelty of the traffic on the wrong side of the road, the wooden houses and the prolific trucks that trundled alongside the cars. In the background The Z sang on, song after song, broken only by the occasional advert or DJ interruption.

Mostly this stuff gets labelled Alternative Rock. I don't much care for the labels, I can never figure out what's supposed to fit where - it's the sounds I enjoy. It's the kind of stuff that Virgin Radio plays in England, only Virgin never lets the songs play for this long without jumping in and irritating me with jingles about how great they are or jumped up DJs reveling in the sound of their own voices and their extreme wit. The German HotFM plays similar music but their internet presence vanished and left me without the occasional fix I was getting. One way and another I've never found a station I'm keen on and at first I didn't notice The Z seeping into my soul.

Back then, that first drive from Washington Dulles airport, all I knew was I was recognising songs, mouthing along to The Barenaked Ladies, U2 and Alanis Morissette until exhaustion took over and I fell asleep. I woke up to the sounds as we approached the house and I got my first glimpse of and introduction to Kenwood Beach

"and the beached whales"

and the locals who used it. Oblivious, the large woman continued paddling with her kids as the sun beat down. We turned and pulled up at the house, grabbed my luggage and they showed me Stephanie's room where I would be staying.

The Z played on inside the house as I pulled items from my case to hand over. Drink and another ornament for Bobbie's dragon collection and condiments and chocolate and music, music, music in the background as we sat and chatted and Nic explained about the shift work and needing to be at Food Lion that night. Bobbie set about making food, Nic

went to grab some precious hours of sleep. My feet tapped to the sound of the radio, my eyes shut and I nodded along.

Jimmy and Becky appeared, Travis in tow. Travis did typical eight year old things while the adults fixed themselves some food then sat and ate it, joining in on the odd refrain of a song here and there. The music almost always played and usually it was the same station. Sometimes someone would lose patience

"I think she's just trying to see how many words she can fit into a line"

with Alanis Morissette, for example, and the radio would be foregone in favour of a CD or perhaps another station, but it was always 104 that we went back to. Nic explained the way the station works,

"They took a gamble and changed the format"

how earlier in the year they hiked up their advertising rates massively and cut down the number of ads they played per hour. Bobbie, meanwhile, told me about how the station is utterly prolific and if you turn off the car radio and walk into a store, chances are you'll catch the end of the song as the same station will be playing in there.

It's a musical home. The biggest disappointment of the holiday was Jimmy's when he found out that the Ozfest date he had tickets for had been cancelled. Another night saw Becky singing viciously along to Tracy Chapman

"Give me one reason to stay here - and I'll turn right back around"

before the final argument that had her walking out on Jimmy and setting off for home, tyres squealing on the tarmac as she pulled out of the drive with Travis in the back seat and Bobbie scared stiff she was going to kill them both. Upstairs, all I heard was the music and the squeal.

Nic and Bobbie met at karaoke. Bobbie tells me the dream catcher above their bed has a musical note suspended in it. Nic plays numerous instruments, most things apart from woodwind, apparently, yet after knowing him something like twelve years, now, I only found this out in February. It came as no surprise that the music is always there, it only surprised me how much their station of choice resonated with me. I don't dance, I don't sing. In that house I came close to both. If I wasn't moving in the rocking chair in time to the beat then I was tapping out the time on my knees, or at least nodding along. When the radio did fall silent I'd be whistling little fragments of the tunes, often not knowing the title or the singer - sometimes not even knowing the words. But the music followed me around and I embraced it.

I said I didn't want to leave. Bobbie said I should think about going back if things get really rocky with the job situation. We got close.

"You've only been here ten days but I've kind of got used to having you around."

By the time we left the house for the last time I was reminding Bobbie why she had gone into a particular room, translating muffled calls between people in different rooms and feeling totally at home. We drove out to Washington and checked into an Econo-Lodge for my last night there and as we went the music played. We didn't talk much that evening before we headed over to Ted's. Nic was cranky with lack of sleep and a need for food and Bobbie was nursing a cold or hay fever style allergy.

The mood picked up after we ate but the music didn't follow us any further, not the good stuff. There was music I didn't recognise playing gently in the background at Ted's place while people chatted. Back at the Lodge the TV in our room spewed sport out at us. We slept, and the next day we took a trip around the mall before I had to go back to England and leave them behind. There at the mall, and in the car, there was no more music. I thought about putting on the radio as we drove out to the airport but chose not to. Bobbie's head was hurting and the tone of the afternoon was a low one. The music might have lifted spirits a little but I didn't want that. I felt relaxed, happy and at home in the little beach house with the sounds that came with it. Most of the time when I left that behind it was to stand or lie on the beach where the music came in the form of crashing waves and bird calls or the excited manic chatter of Jimmy telling me about fishing or hunting, Travis telling me about sharks teeth, Nic expressing surprise at my taking to the water. Sounds of welcome and the lingering tunes from the radio playing in my head. I was putting down roots, misplaced and too quickly. Turning off the music let me wrench myself away and come back to what ought to feel like home.

Now the music plays through the speakers of my computer through an internet connection. On my first day back I turned up the sound to full volume, opened the windows and the patio doors and lay on the lawn in the back garden. The sun was shining and with my eyes shut I could pretend I was there, knowing full well that I wasn't, that I'm not, and that the radio station is just a small link back to what it was to be there. So I sit and listen, now, as I write. There's familiarity in the tunes, a whole upness to the beat and still it's bittersweet. There are tears in my eyes and happy memories in my head. My left foot taps.

***# 'Cause you're everywhere to me #
And when I close my eyes it's you I see #
You're everything I know #
that makes me believe #
I'm not alone #***

Z, 104

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Breaking news:

Sky has just won the rights to screen the World Origami Championships from Tokyo.
Unfortunately it's only available on paper view.