

The Restaurant At The End Of Reality **By David Silver**

It was mid-July and it occurred to Ellen that the time was long overdue for another outing of the Gourblimets club. She sounded out hubby Dan to see what he thought of the idea and whether he had any suggestions as to where to dine this time. In his usual phlegmatic manner he pointed out that wherever they went and whatever they ate, a Rennies or two would be the best dessert.

Taking this as vague approval to make arrangements, Ellen phoned Fran and set to discussing suitable venues. At this point it should be explained that the Club derived its portmanteau name from the aim of acquiring *gourmet* experiences in as unusual and shockingly amoral settings as possible, providing such remarkable culinary delights that the diner would be impassioned into looking up mid-repast exclaiming '*Gor blimey!*'

There was a problem. It seemed that they had experienced the most unusual, the most exotic, the most unforgettable dishes available the length and breadth of Weyford. Eels sozzled in rum then jellied humanely in aspic; mud-baked calves feet sautéed in cider vinegar; hare-wallaby reared organically on the slopes of Ayres Rock; wild boar hunted and shot humorously with potato guns in Scunthorpe. Regarding the latter it is said that the boar find the experience stimulating and life-affirming and if anyone doubts that an animal can laugh – well, go and observe how they employ feathers to stun hyenas in Weyford's Cashewberry Park.

Fran came to the rescue. "I've heard" she said to Ellen excitedly "that there is a new restaurant in World's End Village. It is said to be so unique that the food virtually chooses itself".

It was agreed, and the husbands informed that if they wanted their hot dinners on the night in question they'd better put their toy trains and slide whistles away and join their partners.

On that now-memorable evening Dan and Ellen called for Roger and Fran in their self-driving e-Chariot. It was most fortunate that they lived in an age of advanced technology because prior to leaving home Dan had sampled a small glass of Jackscos Finest Equine-Free Dry Sherry and was already three song-sheets to the wind. It seemed that testudines' shell was not only a great optical aid when incorporated into spectacle frames but it also had a miraculously intoxicating effect on alcoholic beverages; ever since the great Horse Radish scandal several years earlier when it had come to light that certain supermarkets had contaminated their entire range of vegan "You Won't Know The Difference" Mock Meat Burgers with animal products, a number of food retailers had attempted to exploit their own shame by turning a negative into a positive. "What Burgers Have Taught Us" was the snivelling slogan customers were compelled to ponder whilst waiting in checkout queues behind elderly U3A members searching slowly and methodically, oblivious to the barely-suppressed anger of others, for their last coin with which to complete payment. It takes a long time to pay £2.03 in pennies. Anyway, "What Burgers Have Taught Us" quickly became derided in cynical street parlance as 'What Burgers Have Tortoise', but in a stroke of marketing genius Jackscos reclaimed the initiative and proudly replaced the apologetic signs with new ones declaring "What Has Tortoise? Not Our Burgers, But Our Sherry! Do try it!!".

The Gourblimets dress code was, as usual, an informal combination of tuxedos and feather boas and they arrived conspicuously in World's End High Street, a thoroughfare bustling with every passion imaginable. The bouncers outside a brothel named 'Pluck A G String' were struggling to cope with a long queue of failed ukulele players who seemed to have got the wrong end of the stick and were unashamedly strumming their exposed instruments in full

public view. The manager of an 'adult colouring' shop was trying to entice some of the ukulele players in with a wink and a promise of 'something for the Weak End sir?'

The high street seemed to go on forever. Although it was a bright summer's evening, in the distance it seemed to darken and Christmas street lights could be seen twinkling cheerfully. Come to think of it the Gourblimets had observed a sign as they entered the village: "The Residents of World's End Welcome You. Something For Everyone, Any Time. Please Debauch Responsibly".

Fighting their way through a melee of belly dancers, jugglers, fire breathers and Morris dancers they managed to locate their intended destination, a restaurant named enigmatically 'Eat My Dinner'. The ladies had by now managed to get a Manneken Pis human street statue to extinguish their boas which had been accidentally ignited by one of the fire breathers. The men had managed to wipe from the backs of their white tuxedos cartoons of ukuleles crudely distorted into erotic shapes drawn by a gang of mischievous Adult Colourists. Dusting themselves off they entered the premises.

It was bustling inside. The Maître D', a wide man with several smiling chins, each appearing to possess its own self-satisfied expression, approached and asked for the booking name. At this point the ladies realised that each thought the other had made the reservation. Shrieking recriminations and bitch-slapping ensued, only abating when they realised that the other diners and the staff and the dinners had stopped eating and being eaten and were looking and listening intently.

"Peu importe mon cher messieurs-dames, we shall place you temporarily at this table and move you in due course, this I promise". The table indicated backed onto a walkway joining Eat My Dinner and a doorway leading to a takeaway kiosk. Dan, rather sober by now, expressed misgivings which were instantly dismissed by the others, most emphatically of all by Fran who, having glimpsed Laotian White Ant Eggs Soup listed on a 'Specialities Of The Day' wall-board was determined they would not leave. To prove her resolve she elected to sit at the most vulnerable corner of the table, the one being constantly jostled by staff and customers moving between the two establishments.

They sat and waited for the menu but very shortly the Maître D' approached and announced that their dinners were ready for selection. Nonplussed by this they followed him between tables of diners to an aquarium containing various creatures floating or swimming around. "I'll have that one" said Roger decisively, not having a clue as to what he was pointing at, but as Chairman of his local bowling club someone of his Position and Status needed to demonstrate to the World, to his Friends, and, most importantly to his Wife, that he was a man of Decision, of Action, of Presence. "Dear Monsieur" said the Maître D', "I am so sorry, but that is not how things work in this establishment. Your dinner will choose you!". Roger was instantly deflated, his manhood shrivelling within his loins.

At this point a knobbly, wobbly creature approached the glass, extruded a tentacle and tapped in Ellen's direction. "Excellent" exclaimed Maître D', "you shall dine well Madame. Well done, medium, rare, raw or mobile Madame?". Ellen thought for a moment. She usually had her steaks medium to rare but here was something so very unusual. She made her choice. The others each had their turn at being chosen by their dinners and they all returned, three of them a little queasily, to their table.

A drinks menu was brought and selections made. The group also requested a jug of water which arrived in short order. Dan was as usual keeping a sharp eye on things and was sure he had seen it being scooped out of the aquarium. He warned the others but they swept his concerns aside and swigged regardless.

Their dinners arrived in due course but they hadn't yet been assigned the promised better table. It was now impossible to get the attention of any staff as there had been a sudden influx of customers into both the restaurant and the adjoining takeaway kiosk, and the establishment was now heaving. Fran kept getting jostled and her chair was constantly edged along the walkway toward the kiosk; she had to keep getting up to reposition it. The others were reading the instructions that had come with their dinners along with the surgical and safety equipment that accompanied their cutlery. Ellen was advised to anaesthetise her dinner before engaging in discourse with it. Roger was warned that the tiniest sliver of liver would be fatal and for Health and Safety reasons he should don helmet and goggles and engage the services of a professional before attempting to consume his creature. Dan was instructed to place his dinner in the accompanying sick bag and take it home for his cat. Fran was ... where was Fran? "My God" shouted Roger, "she's being taken away!". Sure enough her chair, with her on it, was being inexorably swept away by the great flow of people heading toward the takeaway kiosk. "Sit down Roger, it's too late, she's gone" said Dan who had an inkling of the dangers that faced them. "I advise you to quietly eat your dinner and don't make a fuss". "Not make a fuss? This isn't good enough. Don't they know who I am?" exclaimed Roger furiously. "I'm going to find the manager and tell him not expect a tip after this experience".

Months later Dan sat quietly at home with his cat Dino, eating a McDonalds takeaway and pondering the events of that evening. How Fran had disappeared, probably into someone's microwave, never to be seen again. How Ellen had found she had so much in common with her dinner that she had eloped with it. How Roger had been consigned to an eternity of washing up.

The only one who seemed happy was the cat, who was still sicking up Dan's dinner.

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Based on a real dinner at a real restaurant.

With acknowledgement to Douglas Adams' The Restaurant At The End Of The Universe

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