

John Allen

## Orifice in the Undieworld

AT THE BOTTOM OF A VALLEY in northern England, in a rural market town that shares its name with a dessert pudding, I purchased a gigantic pair of women's knickers emblazoned with the skull and crossbones and the warning "Danger Potholes."

Bakewell has long had a high regard for itself, with its frilly teashops and refined purveyors of clothing for "gentlemen farmers." You see them togged up in their tweedy country clothing, deerstalker hats, thornproof shirts, and Barbour coats, all red cheeks and toothy smiles like the family Windsor (who also have no work to do). Looking on in envy are the Golf Club and Round Table Clubbing company executives, reps, and various professionals engaged in a "countrified-scramble" up the social ladder, yearning to breathe the saddle soap, foxing-hounds, and vintage claret that anoints the elect. Beneath Bakewell's *Country Life Magazine* veneer lurks the tribalism of "lesser" communities, encampments of stone clustered at ancient crossroads, of which my working-class village, a few miles north, is an example.

Bakewell puffs out its tweedy waist-coated chest every Monday "Market Day." For twelve hours "Olde England" meets "Middle England" in a primal ritual of livestock trading, where "gentlemen farmers" indulge themselves in bidding against "working farmers" over a prize breeding-bull or a fine ram. On "Market Day" the working farmers of the area take a break from their hard graft to imbibe in Whisky, Best Bitter, and raucous conversation at the Wheatsheaf Hotel and other hostelries. During these sessions the robust farmers—draped in an acre or two of tweed and waxed cotton—fill the pubs to bursting, so that their earthy ranks spill out into the narrow, busy streets surrounding the market square, a boozy updated scene from Breughel.

A sea of tarpaulins shelters the market stalls, lest rain dampen the spirit of the barkers flogging everything from kitchenware to underwear, from carpets to pet food. Traders pour into town every Monday—as they have for several centuries—and so too shoppers coming by car or bus from nearby Sheffield. Sheffield, the antithesis of everything that Bakewell strives to preserve, is a large post-industrial steel-city and cultural smelter encompassing an immigrant population, an ongoing amalgam of people, race, and place. For me, Bakewell Market on that warm, sunny Monday afternoon in the summer of 1990 was a memory as much as a mirage.

I had been living in Massachusetts for several years, where I worked as a booking agent and production manager in a nightclub larger than most, and where, gob-smacked, I watched a rich selection of entertainers command the stage: Wilson Pickett, James Brown, Martha Reeves, among others. And I talked to them, listened to them. They inspired me, so I quit the nightclub and formed a band to fulfill a lifelong desire to perform. Mind you, I had no obvious talent; so rather than learn to play an instrument I resorted to singing. (Later I took up the tin whistle, but in my hands it sounded like a boiling kettle.) I found a guitarist who was willing to play with me. As bad as we were, we quickly developed a unique style of combined influences held together by my childhood exposure to a Tom Jones wannabe culture of working-class, social-club lounge singers.

Tom Jones! Saturday night turns at our village “Ex-Servicemen’s Club”—cheesy wannabes from Sheffield acting out their “Tom” fantasies. These characters were adored and derided. Pissed-up grannies sucked down Barley Wines, Rum and Blacks, dizzy from staring at bingo cards, loved the atonal, polyester flattery of whatever “Tom” was before them, crooning into a microphone, pinkie-finger extended like a bejeweled cocktail sausage. And “The Lads”—males of the tribe from various age groups clotted around the bar, laughing and firing volleys of insults and performance poison at the stage, fueled by beer, testosterone, and “Lads’ Night” bravura. My compulsion to go on stage was a collision between the appetite to perform and a

desire to turn back the clock. Over the years I'd stockpiled a host of memories, ideas, and hunches that I could convert into songs, monologues, and Benny Hill slapstick.

Which brings me to those mutant knickers... those aberrations of intimate apparel. Without my realizing it, the knickers were to become central to my act—a living cartoon tribute to Tom Jones. An Indo-European salesman from Sheffield peppered me with his sales pitch. I don't know if the bloke was a Muslim or a Hindu, but one thing's for sure, the dastardly balbriggans wouldn't have been out of place hanging in the wardrobe of the goddess Kali, alongside her necklace of human skulls and her apron fashioned from the severed arms of male victims. The waistband had a tummy-enclosing circumference of at least seventy inches; they were made of stretchy, white polyester, and emblazoned across their frontage in bold red graphics was—well, you know it already—the skull and crossbones with the warning... “DANGER POTHOLES!” These passion dampers spoke to the ancient power of goddesses, the terrifying Kali, and the unsettling Sheela Na Gig of local lore, with her engorged reproductive organs and shriveled face and tits. They were an unnerving sight! A vivid and terrifying archetype of man's inability to come fully to terms with vaginas, at first I hesitated but the unrelenting insistence of the salesman, who's passion for separating me from my money was matched only by his own desire to be rid of the undies convinced me that I could overcome any deep-rooted fears... and so I went ahead and bought the bastards!

I returned to the United States with goodies from home, tins of Ambrosia-rice pudding, packets of Birds-custard powder, assorted sweets and toffees, plastic bottles of Mansfield Bitter, and... wrapped around glass bottles of Marston's Pedigree Ale and jars of Marmite, the voluminous undergarments, a shock-absorber against rough handling. I was a bit queasy about having to explain these huge, baggy, and offensively ornamented bloomers to customs officers at Boston's Logan Airport, if it came to that. Still, I climbed aboard the 747 in Manchester, and the undies went undetected.

Back in my New England valley—famed for its arty college

towns, its counter-culture, and politically correct ways—I secured an engagement at a former drug-drop and biker hangout, under new management. “Big Marty” had hands the size of pizzas, and his face, even bigger, wore a permanent grin. He didn’t give a shit about codes and regulations; he just cleared the junk out of the cellar and started serving beer. It was a bawdy, scruffy basement scene, with the feel of “anything might happen” in a town starved for rude fun, which was what my band promised, starting with its name, “The Big, Bad Bollocks.”

One night I pulled the undies from a pocket and used them to wipe my forehead. People chortled, recognizing the delicate frills around the monstrous leg-holes, but they had no idea of their size, or the message. I allowed them to unfurl. The audience took a good look, chuckled and guffawed, and a few wolf-whistled. On the spot I invented a story regaling a previous evening’s night of passion, the details of which had revived under the influence of these undies

Following this debut, ever more elaborate tales began to evolve of Bacchanalia in the backs of Chevy pickup trucks behind the Stanley Precision Tools factory with gigantic kielbasa-eating women of the night. Or worse—the trysts of Ted Kennedy, watched over by the corpulent, alcohol-swollen-nosed Speaker, the late Tip O’Neil, as he straddled the skinny backs of House interns while wearing those very knickers! Mind you, these images from Bosch came to me unbidden, even before tales had emerged of Bill and Monica at tender sport in the Oval Office. By gum, these undies were intoxicating, not unlike the vapors that had inspired oracles to prophecy. The undies invoked the essence of coarse northern English comedians infamous for their crude and insensitive views on life. Standing with the undies in the glow of stage lights, I channeled a crusty netherworld of political incorrectness.

Soon the knickers earned their own stage entrance, whereby they were soaked in Guinness and hurled from the back of the cellar by an assistant willing to work for beer. After they’d hit me in the side of my head and fallen to the floor with a splat, I’d reach down and pick them up. I un-bunched them, pretended to

see them for the first time, inspected them and displayed their message. I hushed the audience. I gave the knickers a twist between my hands, adding that although I understood that my fans were aroused by my performance, although their passionate attention flattered me, I had to ask a favor: "Please wring out your underwear before throwing it on stage." I continued, "There's electrical equipment up here on stage, and it can get very dangerous with moisture around." At which point I wrung out the undies above my upturned face, *with my mouth open!* It was wonderfully disgusting, in a drunken, surrealistic way, a spoof on the Tom Jones panty-tossing thing... and much enjoyed by the punters. Eventually the gargantuan undies were eagerly anticipated by the band's following. Many of our fans would shout, "THROW THE UNDIES, THROW THE UNDIES!" This expression of fondness changed to drunken cheers when the great, flapping fanny-rags sailed across the room, dripping of Guinness!

Yes, the undies had lured me home to a lost world of polyester, puke, and cheese. They'd broken the seal on my vault of crusty cultural curiosities, as I exercised fully, for the first time, a compulsion to perform. And perform I did, for good or for ill, under the influence of scoundrels such as Alex Harvey, Johnny Rotten, and Shane McGowan, foul icons of my near-maturity. Before them, it was Elvis, Mick (Jagger), and Tom who were the triumvirate of my fantasy lad's world. Tom, however, was the one most like the blokes in my village, "One of The Lads." After all, Elvis was a Yank. And Mick was a wanker, too comfy and educated, and worse yet, he was a bloody southerner. It was Tom who'd been cut from the same working-class fabric as everyone I knew.

Large from the outset, the gusset alone would've made a reasonably sized pair of skivvies. They had stretched both physically and mythically to proportions suitable only for the fiercest goddesses. Thus, I declared they had been worn by Delilah herself on that fateful night when "she laughed no more." And so my rendition of "Delilah" became—in conjunction with the marvelous undies—the greasy, mucky lynchpin to a cavalcade of

music, chaos, and icon worship. Once unfurled, they were no longer a cheap pair of overlarge polyester knickers—they were an unholy relic. They were the hardest working undies in show business! And as such they had their own fan base... people who wanted to touch them, get close to them—who knows...? Maybe even wear them!

My band began traveling throughout New England, New York, and New Jersey, playing more prestigious venues. The mighty Clipper-sail knickers traveled with us, packed along with all the other gear to stage a show. Eventually, I returned them in semi-triumph to England, flying aboard a jumbo jet to Manchester for a twenty-nine date “Pub Tour.” They journeyed to Bakewell, to the Wheatsheaf overlooking the market square, and thence to Sheffield... home to the immigrant who’d bestowed them upon me for a price which now seemed shamefully low, given their magic. All across northern England they visited pubs and clubs, charming the punters and drinkers, until finally, on the last night of their grueling schedule they found themselves on the stage of my village’s “Ex-Servicemen’s Club.” The very stage where I’d witnessed the Tom-imitators who had so inspired me. Proudly they flapped, freshly soaked with Tetley’s bitter. Together we faced the grannies, kids, lorry-drivers and... “The Lads”! As I wrung them out, I alluded to a couple of “Bingo-Biddies” as being the possible owners of the undies, gave my speech on the dangers of electricity and moisture, and launched into “Delilah” with the Biggest, Baddest Bollocks I could muster.

We were a hit! The Bingo Biddies loved us, the lorry-drivers laughed, and “The Lads” hurled insults, the highest honor. Later as I was getting paid, the club’s Committee Chairman slapped me on the back saying what a “bloody good show” we’d put on for them, and how we were “better than most of the crap that comes through.”

He invited me over to the bar for a Tetley’s. The head settled on two perfect pints of the fresh, coppery nectar—served as it should be... in a clean sleeve glass, bearing the little etched crown symbol of the imperial pint. He was quiet for a moment, then said, “Englebert Humperdink did a turn on that stage tha’

know's—so tha's followed some pretty big footsteps up there, Eh?"

"I didn't know that," I replied. "Was he any good?"

"Nah... 'ee were shite."

"Well," I said, as we toed the bar, "he's no Tom Jones is he?"

"You're fuckin' right there," he said.

Following their return to America, the undies flapped and slapped around bars and clubs, acquiring new stains and scars, and continuing to stretch. And yet, somehow, their iconic power had lost its grip on me. Their origin had been as a stage prop in support of an uncertain and nervous lead singer. As I'd become more confident and developed more songs, along with an increasing ability to sing, the band had developed aspirations. We'd been signed to a small record label and had already released our debut CD to general approval. We were about to go into the studio to record our follow-up. Now the gigs were workshops for getting the songs up to speed, and the undies were no longer necessary. But as the weekend of our scheduled recording session loomed closer, together with the increased preparation, there was an increase in anxiety. So it was decided by the whole band that the undies should be a part of the sessions... a mascot!

The recording studio was a low concrete building, formerly a slaughterhouse, in a western Massachusetts scrubland. It had no windows, except in a back office which now served as the control room. The interior of the studio was murky, dark and creepy, and cool. The isolation room for recording solo instruments was a walk-in cold storage room. Its black walls were covered with meat hooks, and there were rows of overhead rails, strung again with vicious-looking hooks. It was a harsh setting—even for a band like ours, with a history of playing seedy venues and attracting drunken yahoos.

Ignoring the icy vibes of our above-ground dungeon, we used duct tape to hang the knickers on the wall facing our instrument set-up. As big as they were, and as mythical as they had once become, they appeared small and vulnerable in that setting. Almost immediately the good humor they had accumulated over the years hemorrhaged from their grubby, pale leg holes. Drained

of their totemic power they were depressing to look at; equally depressing was our session that yielded unsatisfactory results, largely sabotaged by technical problems. All the while, the undies stared down from their duct-taped vantage point like some insane, symbolic crucifix abandoned by heretical practitioners of an undie-mass. I could stand it no longer... they had let me down... they had failed to lighten the atmosphere. Hell! They were making it worse... hanging there, limp, waiting to die. I tore them off the wall.

The snapping, ripping sound of the duct tape separating from concrete sounded like skin being flayed. I stepped out of the loading-bay doors and tossed the undies into a rusty oil drum at the side of the ramp. It was half-filled with McDonalds wrappers, pieces of broken furniture, cigarette ends, and stale water. Down into the abyss the undies sank... weighted by the duct tape. Down amongst the debris collected there, sinking lower until only partially visible, hooked on the sharp green spike of a broken beer bottle. I turned and walked back into the slaughterhouse, relieved to be rid of them at long last.

More than a year passed, and our gigging schedule continued to increase despite the collapse of our record company, and with it, the loss of the master recording we'd made at "The Slaughterhouse." We ignored the loss, and I ignored the disappearance of the undies, except that... except that *I* had abandoned *them*, I had cast them aside, when their only fault had been to bear witness to the The Slaughterhouse sessions. The poor, faithful fanny-rags were a friend I had wronged, and I resolved to put right the inequity.

So there I was, one gray, over-cast, drizzly day, bumping down the dirt road to the recording studio, past the scrub of weed-trees, poison ivy and brambles. I caught a glimpse of the building and felt a rush of surprise. At the loading dock I saw the barrel and my heart leapt, though tempered by the nagging certainty that it must have been emptied long ago. After all, it had been almost two years. Using a rusty stem from a discarded microphone stand, I poked through that rusty oil drum, to see if the undies might still be lying in that awful container to which I condemned them.

And there they were. I hoisted the soiled and sorry skivvies from the disgusting broth. The knickers had been buried under layers of decomposing muck, flotsam thrown into the abyss over the many months. I dropped them into a plastic Stop and Shop bag. They were greenish-brown and heavy, and smelled like a backed-up drain.

When I got home I spread them out on my driveway and blasted them with the garden hose. They slid around on the tarmac, filling and billowing with the pressure of the water, emptying again and shedding chunks of sludge. Miraculously, the undies were already becoming whiter than I'd imagined possible, and upon closer inspection I was amazed by their condition. There was no significant damage or deterioration beyond what I had remembered. I turned off the hose and swept the water and debris into the storm drain at the corner of my driveway.

I found myself marveling at their resilience, adding further to their legend, for they had risen. They were going back on the stage, the comeback, that other great myth of entertainment redemption. Their schedule was nothing like it had been before, but hey... they were back! And yet the comeback faded, and they spent as much time in my gig-bag as on the stage. They ended up—following a particularly grueling session at one of our many bread and butter gigs at a drinking dive—being tossed into the back of my garage, soaked in beer, tied up in a plastic bag and forgotten for the better part of a year, which allowed them to develop a rich pelt of blue-green mold.

Their penultimate revival took place a year later... for the Worcester Centrum New Year's Eve show in front of ten thousand squealing teenagers—where we opened for The Mighty Mighty Bosstones. After the fact, there is no doubt in my mind that some of those squeals were actually screams of primal fear; wrenched from the soft, pink innards of fifteen-year-old boys, as they gaped, terror-struck, at those voluminous underpants knowing in their virginal souls that somewhere, someday, they'd find themselves confronted by the power and the glory of their own "Orifice in the Undieworld."

After that show, perhaps the zenith of the band's career, the

undies were laundered and retired to a clothes drawer, where, having mistaken them for a t-shirt, I removed them from time to time. I caught myself daydreaming on their tenacious history and the journey they had made, only to end their days in state, like a battle flag... and so they would've done—had Tom Jones not come to town.

Tom Jones... Holy Shit...! TOM JONES was coming to my little New England college town. When I saw the advert I couldn't bloody believe it... TOM-FUCKIN'-JONES! And he was playing the same night we were, just a few blocks away. I immediately re-scheduled our gig to a later hour so that I could see Tom's show. I started pestering the promoter about the chances of getting backstage to meet him. I even asked if I could introduce him on stage, but I was rebuffed.

The next couple of months rolled along as usual: go to work, play with the kids, pay the bills, fight with the missus, only I was bubbling under with plans of how to get Tom Jones to our show, fantasizing how I'd get him on stage to do a song with us... and it wasn't just me; we discussed my delusional plans as a band, wondering what would be a good song to do with him, my vote of course being for "Delilah."

As the days ticked by, Beverley, my wife, would try to shake me out of my delusions—"You don't really think Tom Jones is going to be interested in you lot do you, I mean you don't really think you'll get him to come and sing a song with you—do you?" I would have known she was right as usual if I'd allowed myself, but I was enjoying the fantasy far too much.

Digging around in my drawers for the clothing that I always wore when I was excited about a gig, the socks with pictures of sheep on them, a certain pair of black jeans, my old black linen shirt in which I felt both comfortable and safe, as well as empowered to perform... I suddenly found myself holding The Undies and with a blinding rush of adrenaline it was clear what I had to do...

I would throw them at Tom Jones!

For this was their destiny; they'd lain in my drawer too long. It was time for me, as Keeper of the Clippers, to act. Therefore, I would launch them at their unwitting creator! I quickly folded

the undies and placed them into the pocket of my special black linen jacket. Then I pulled on my ancient Doc Marten's, and together with Beverley we hurried down to a date with destiny.

I'd never seen Tom Jones perform live, and until the moment he came out on stage, I'm not sure that I really believed he would be there. When Tom burst out onto the stage blasting "What's New Pussycat—Whoa-a-Whoa-a-Whoa-a," it was, for just a short time, impossible to accept! All the childhood memories, beliefs, and fantasies that were wrapped up in this "Lad from Wales": watching him on the telly on *Sunday Night at The London Paladium*, *The Morcambe and Wise Show*, and *Top of the Pops*, listening to my older sister and her friends compare him with Elvis, seeing the legions of Tom-wannabes in pubs. I squeezed Beverley's hand, turning to her and grinning and whispering, "It's Tom Jones, Tom fuckin' Jones.... Isn't this fuckin' amazing!" Beverley told me to calm down. My smiling muscles were broken and jammed in full-blown grinning-idiot mode, and my cheeks and ears were starting to cramp.

Tom controlled every molecule in the theatre, anointing his votaries with his sex-laser, a beacon of hormone beams. About halfway through the show he sang a couple of slow ones and began to flirt with women in the audience. He did so in such a way that it was a form of soft porn; he spoke the words to the songs in his deep, Rhonda Valley timbre. Otherwise normal women jumped from their seats, gathered by the stage, tossing the tiniest, most fragile, laciest panties before him, the intimate apparel that ascended and then drifted down to his firmly planted Welsh, by way of Las Vegas, feet.

"Go on up there! Go and throw your knickers at him!" my wife insisted. "Quick—do it now before it's too late!"

"No!" I said "I'm not going to. I shouldn't, it's stupid, I can't."

I crammed the undies into my pocket as deep as they'd go. There was no way I was going to get out there amongst the harem of panty-pitchers. I would be so out of place; it would be like following through on one of those moments when you have the impulse to shout something inappropriate in a courtroom or a church.

“You’re a wimp, you’re a bloody coward, go on. Go down there and throw them... Now!” Beverley demanded. And so I found myself rising, commanded as it were by Kali, to pay homage, or end up with my head and arms dangling like trinkets from her Sunday best.

I walked falteringly down the dark aisle past the rows filled with Tom-fanciers, feeling as if all eyes were on me, their owners wondering: “What the hell is this jerk up to? Doesn’t he know that only women go up to the stage?”

When I reached the orchestra pit I pulled the undies from my pocket, balled them up tight as I could. I leaned against the brass-railed barrier and threw them with a determination unmatched by any of the women lobbing their intimate apparel unto Tom. My undies took flight through that charged perimeter of light and desire, muscling their way amidst the delicate white and pastel-shaded panties that ignited benignly as they passed through the wash of colors from the stage lights. Tom stood there, as befits a demigod, surrounded by fluttering lace and cotton. The mighty bloomers flapped above his head then came in to land with an audible thump by his feet. A look slid into his radiant grin, the kind of grin that only someone aware of his good fortune can wear. His big Welsh-lad’s face beamed as he reached to pick up the rumpled bags. He lifted them off the floor in his big left hand; his right hand—a huge, balled fist—still gripped the wireless microphone (no bejeweled pinkie sticking out like a cocktail sausage). A flash of amusement juggled his features as he laughed, “What the bloody hell...?” He straightened up, placed the microphone on a stand, and unfurled the undies, holding them by the waistband. They hung limply between his raised, black jacketed arms, the message of warning with the skull and crossed bones facing away from the audience. There was a pause as he studied them, showing them to his band, sharing the joke with the lads, leaving the audience to wonder. He then described the undies’ message and the skull and crossed bones design to the crowd before giving them a quick look. He behaved rather coyly, and perhaps he was a little dumbfounded. But what he did next showed what he really felt. He slowly folded them while

quietly announcing as if to himself, “Them’s keepers they are”; he stepped back to a small console of shelves where he kept a carafe of water and a spare microphone and carefully slipped the undies into the top shelf space. He patted them one final time as if to bring out the dove in every blundering albatross, and then turned to the audience wearing a fresh, lighthearted smile.

They belonged to Tom Jones now... they’d always belonged to Tom Jones, or at least “Delilah.” But now they really were Tom’s. He’d just shown them the kind of care and attention they deserved. They were now truly his. I stole one last glimpse of them—tucked safely into his stage valet—and went back to my seat.

With that, I was liberated from the seriocomic, semi-magical undies, the polyester passion dampers that had held me fast in their spell, and all who had witnessed their charms, since the Monday Market Day in Bakewell when I bought them on a whim from a Prince of the East.

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