

Towing The Party Line

Christmas inevitably brings the usual round of parties, but the very idea of them is enough to make **Paul Morley** break out into a warm sticky sweat...

Parties make me anxious. Everything makes me anxious, because living means living anxiously, but the *thought* of a party, let alone the *reality* of a party, makes up for a certain, monstrous kind of apprehension akin to the feeling of knowing at exactly what time I am going to die. Just the thought of it makes me very concerned and disheartened. Dying I mean, not going to a party. I suppose I'll choose going to a party before death, but only just. Just the thought of it makes me very concerned and disheartened. Going to a party, I mean. I break out into a warm sticky sweat: I can see it now . . . it's party time . . . the door opens . . . I'm forced into the flow . . . I must mix . . . people at the party laugh as if things were going better and better, as if they did not know that the abyss is there . . . they smile at one another, are nice and friendly and polite . . . they exchange kisses as if they adore each other. And yet they are well aware of what is waiting for them. They pretend not to know. How brave they are, how patient they are, how ignorant they are, or perhaps how wise, or perhaps they have some secret, unconscious knowledge of things that I don't know, that I cannot succeed in knowing.

If I killed someone - did I tell you, I sat in front of Jeffrey Archer at the theatre the other day? - and my punishment was to meet and mix at a party once a week for five years, I'm not sure that I wouldn't prefer lengthy imprisonment. At least I'd be able to get on with this novel I've been writing. It's lovingly and I think rather bravely based on the occasional party I go to, when I force myself to

cut myself off from myself and endure populated confinement in the name of my novel, the name of which is *Life's A Party* because there can be no doubt that it is. Yes, life is a party, and parties make me anxious. You start off all fresh and confident and hopeful thinking it can never be as bad as all that and I'll never be that unhappy again, and think of the new friends that you'll make, and you're pleasant to friends and strangers, and you try talking to them for a bit, and you get bored, and you turn, as you must, to whatever drink you can find, and it will all end in tears, or certain death, and then the hangover.

I'm writing a book about hangovers. What was it the man said - every young writer who ever had a hangover thinks that an account of drink is a short road to success. I'm in no fit state to argue with this. At the end of every chapter there are the oppressive, unforgiving words: there's a party tonight. Yes, my hangover book is a horror story: we've been here before haven't we? The Party Of Death. The story of a man caught up in the irreversible machinery of defeat, destroyed by years of going to parties where the records he wants to play are taken off half-way through by everyone else at the party. The story of a man moved enough by self pity to even drink stale Heineken, all that he can find in the grimy kitchen. Why only the other day, and I can remember the indignation like it's going to happen any moment, I tried to play a Morrissey song at a party, and it was one of his less weighed down pieces. This was pulled from the turntable within seconds by a

team of men with wonderful necks wearing skirts that glowed in the dark, and the unreasonably up-to-date wall-to-wall acid groove state of sound is set in motion, sounding to my sour ageing ears suspiciously like a cross between Boney M and Throbbing Gristle.

I remember pre-80s that the hipper parties would consist entirely of a soundtrack of deepest dub - the first dub is the deepest - and rarest reggae, drilling or raking the party to slow death. These days, the hipper parties resound with the sound of burning house and various, complex continental beats that you purchase in strange shops as if you were selecting exotic forms of cheese. One of the things I have learnt over the years, and it's going into a book I'm writing called *These Are A Few Of The Favourite Things I Have Learnt Over The Years*, is: never play a Cecil Taylor record at even the smallest dinner party. I made that mistake the other day, proudly showing off my rare Swiss Cecil Taylor boxed set, setting the needle down on side three, and the people I'd invited immediately asked if we could turn up the sound on the *Everyman* documentary of the Pope, while my wife Claudia threatened never to wear those white socks again while that record was in the house and, worse, would insist that we started to go to more parties unless I destroyed it. I threw Cecil away, and just to be sure disposed of my collection of Throbbing Gristle and Boney M.

Maybe parties baffle me because small talk wounds me. Here is an example of my kind of small talk: 'We say that we sleep so that we don't go mad. We may drink so that we don't go mad. In fact, we seem to do a lot of things in life in order that we don't go mad. And yet it's living in life that makes us go mad.'

This is an example of a small chat I had with Ronnie Corbett last month. Believe it or not, and this will only be appreciated by readers who



a) know who Ronnie Corbett is - I take nothing for granted - and b) know that his most famous programme is called *Sorry*, during which he says 'sorry' 20 times a show, and I tripped over him, and he turned to me, and said, 'SORRY!' As you could imagine, I couldn't stop laughing.

You see, you must go to parties to get to know people who you don't know, as these things move like that, but it's the actual practicality of speaking to people for the first time that is at the centre of my anxiety. Where do you begin? I usually begin with madness, life and soul. This never makes me the life and soul of the party.

Oh, I can see that you've finally admitted that you are a little curious about the small chat I had with Ronnie



Corbett. I'll go to any and many lengths while pursuing research for the novel. Or, well, anything for a free drink, let's be honest. Except for going to the kind of party where even *you* don't take a bottle, so there's nothing to drink but orange squash, and look at that bastard over their clutching the Red Stripe with 20% extra. I don't feel so anxious about show-biz parties, not least because it does supply you with a few anecdotes about famous people that you can fall back on when you're trapped at a party and it's obvious that the people you're talking to don't want to hear about *me*. Yeah, I've stood at the next urinal to Boy George. Oh sure, I once got so drunk I tried to stab David Steele, Bob Geldof once spiked my drink with

something that made me believe that I was Paul Daniel's lover. I once kissed Robbie Coltrane's feet and indulged in the smallest of talk with Nick Roeg. Well, it was more of a *pause* really. Well... it was a flashback.

The last show-biz party I went to was after the first night of the musical *Budgie*. I know that's not the kind of thing you should mention in front of an intelligent reader, but Adam Faith was a hero of mine 15 years ago. Now? Well, he's just the man who looks after Sebastian Coe's money, and there's a definition of 'tory' for you. Life is a party? Did I tell you that Jeffrey Archer was sat behind me? Lucky for him I was sober, and didn't have a knife. Christopher Biggins was sat in front of me. Life is a party.

I wasn't invited to the party - being a *critic*, I suppose - held at a big rich disco in Leicester Square. The trick is, stride along the red carpet that splits a gathering crowd of stupid, gaping onlookers on the lookout for Henry Cooper and Michael Winner, and look as though you're at least at the top of the fourth division of fame, or have an OBE. Once inside, grab a bottle, and play spot the minor EastEnder. Oh look, there's the blonde girl from the market. There's Pat from the Vic. There's the boyfriend of whatsitsname. Jesus Christ - there's Gary Glitter! I find another bar that looks a bit more exclusive, and a bare hostess comes to me and asks 'Adam Faith?' No, Paul Morley, actually. 'No, are you a

friend of Adam Faith's!' Well, in a sense aren't all men friends of Adam! Oh, I'm a laugh a lifetime on the back of a bottle: after all, I'm a young man trying to write a novel. I get kicked out of the Adam Faith bar just as Nigel Dempster and Lionel Blair arrive. I think to myself, Bob Geldof's spiked my drink again.

Now we're at the end of the year, there seems to be a party a week. This is punishment. Maybe I have killed somebody after all. This means that because the host knows I once worked in the music business and that I am a tv critic I will be introduced to the man who played session guitar with Wham in China, and the girl who was an extra in *Crossroads*. Anything to encourage *conversation*.

Why do we always have to talk to each other? Can't we just stare each other out and have another drink? Why is it so important to talk to people that you don't know? Just so that you can get to know them and then have arguments and perhaps kill each other and be sentenced to a party life after death, where you are always suffering that moment when you walk into a party and everyone turns and looks at you . . . except they're not looking at you, they've just spotted somebody who once appeared on Jonathan Ross. Now, I've just discovered that the morning's post has delivered four invitations to parties. One at my lawyers, one for a friend to launch his new album, *The Guardian* Christmas book luncheon, and a drinks party for the contributors to Channel 4's *Comment* and *Book Choice*. Have I got enough anecdotes to go round? Haven't I got other things to do, like watch the Michael Caine films that I've never seen? I feel party sick already.

And now I find out that I've written the wrong column. I should have written a piece on *political* parties at Christmas. How on earth am I going to begin that article...?

Political parties make me anxious. •