

Look Back in Hunger

The Autobiography

Jo Brand

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Extract

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Chapter 1

Slaughter in Loughborough

‘Please welcome Jo Brand!’

I step into the firing line.

Yes, ‘firing line’ is the appropriate phrase. The ultimate fear of the stand-up is that a heckle will get you right in the heart and melt you, like the Wicked Witch of the West, into a steaming heap of green gooey stuff.

I am at Loughborough University in the Midlands, notable for its emphasis on sport, which of course I am not. I am doing what we stand-ups euphemistically call a ‘student gig’. (In my limited experience this means an inebriated rabble, coated with sexual tension, displaying the concentration span of a gnat, whose milk of human kindness sours quickly and unpredictably, resulting in an avalanche of heckling and/or the appropriation of missiles.)

Jo Brand

I am on a stage above the audience and as I look out I see a young male-heavy crowd, probably a bit pissed, gazing at me half expectant, half challenging. And this is what I've sat in a car on the M1 for. Sitting on the M1 is a major hobby of most comedians. The time I've spent on my arse on this charming motorway probably adds up to months, if not a year, of my life.

The M1 is a capricious mistress (yes, I do aspire to be Jeffrey Archer). Of course there are certain times of the week when the M1 is much, much worse, and without doubt Friday is the winner. My heart would always plummet when I looked at a tour sheet and saw either Manchester, Sheffield, Bolton, Blackburn or similar booked in on a Friday night, because I knew we would have to leave at a ridiculous time, maybe midday, just to travel a couple of hundred miles. I say 'just' a couple of hundred miles because on a few occasions I drove to Newcastle and back in a day, so Sheffield and the like seem dead easy.

If you put together worst-case scenarios of what can go wrong on a motorway journey, then time stretches like elastic. Maybe Friday night on the M1 with a crash thrown in. If you had road works as well, you knew it was going to take the best part of a weekend to get there.

Service stations weren't up to much in the eighties either, although that staple of the stand-up comic, a Ginsters pie and a can of Coke, was always welcome as far as I was concerned, if only to break the monotony of

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staring out of the window at the never-changing landscape of scrubby trees and silver-coloured Nissan Micras.

The most demoralising motorway problem is the one when you're tonning it (I beg your pardon, I mean sticking to the national speed limit) back from up north at about two in the morning and out of nowhere there suddenly appears a bleeding massive queue stretching as far as the eye can see ten miles outside London. It makes you want to weep or get out and hit the driver of the car in front, as you've somehow managed to convince yourself it's his fault.

For no particular reason other than I can, here are my three favourite motorways:

The M40

I love the M40. The countryside's glorious and I've never been in a really bad traffic jam on it (although I know many have). I like the sweep down towards Princes Risborough, where a very naughty comedian who'd borrowed his friend's flash motor to take us to a gig once got up to 140 miles an hour, while I screamed because he was a bit of a shit driver.

The M42

There's something glorious about skirting around Birmingham without having to enter the city. Sorry, that was a crap joke at the expense of Birmingham, which I actually like.

The M5

It can be hideous at holiday time, but I'm never on it then so I don't care. Also there are lots of mysterious sculptures at the side of the road which are slightly scary and make you wonder whether, if you broke down there in the middle of the night, the locals might come out and kill you.

And my three worst motorways:

The M1

Everything about it is depressing.

The M56

I once got a puncture on the M56 at two o'clock in the morning and there was no way I was stopping. I drove into Manchester on it and bugged up my car. Also, I had my car nicked in Manchester and it was used to ram-raid a jeweller's, and that doesn't endear the place to me.

The M50

Where is it going and why is it there?

The lot of the stand-up is to spend hours gazing out of the window feeling that maybe you couldn't get more depressed. And then you meet a student crowd at Loughborough University.

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I know it's important to get the audience with the first couple of jokes, because once you start to lose them things can go downhill pretty quickly. I throw out a couple of one-liners, because that's what I do. I ask the audience whether I should move the microphone stand, as otherwise they won't be able to see me. A few people nicked this joke off me subsequently, including some who weren't even fat, and I considered suing them under the Trade Descriptions Act.

I also try: 'I'm anorexic, by the way, because anorexic people look in the mirror and think they look fat . . . and so do I.' Result: some tittering but not the woof of laughter that it normally gets. I think lots of comics cling to their favourite jokes as if they are lifebelts bobbing up and down ahead of them in the stormy sea of a difficult audience. And if you grab for one and the joke goes badly then at that point you start to drown.

I haven't reached the stage where I'm relaxed enough to improvise on a theme or size up the rabble and respond to the mood of the room. Within a couple of minutes it's all gone horribly wrong. Well, it seems like a couple of minutes. For all I know it could be twenty, as I find time has a different quality when I'm on stage – it moves at a completely different pace and when the audience isn't an easy one, it slows down almost to a standstill. The crowd is split. Half of them aren't the least bit interested in what I have to say, turning to each other to chat,

and the other half seem quite keen on shouting abuse at me, which on the whole, thankfully, they don't seem to have prepared earlier, owing to its lack of sophistication. Consequently, the air is peppered with a rather uninspiring collection of 'fat lesbians', 'fuck offs' and 'borings', which I can just about cope with, even though it's obviously not the ideal night out for anyone with an ego as fragile as an eggshell.

People constantly say to me, 'Oh God, I couldn't do your job, you're so brave,' as if I work on an oil rig, do a spot of gun-running in Sierra Leone or tightrope-walk across the Niagara Falls for a living. Honestly though, it's not that bad once you get used to it. I suppose it's possible that my threshold for abuse is higher than other people's. This is partly because I'm a woman, and there seem to be more opportunities for abuse in Ladyworld. We are constantly appraised, commented upon, looked up and down, dismissed as invisible, and all because . . . the lady loves Milk Tray. If you've got a few (or loads) of pounds sewn on due to Milk Tray scoffing, the appraisal is laced with abuse about your unsuitability as a sexual partner. Having had my fair share of this, I kind of expect it and probably put up with more than a three-stone deb with a secure sense of self may have done. Added to that, throughout my nursing career I'd put up with some excessively extreme and very articulate abuse, so a mere 'fat' heckle isn't really much to write home about.

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The trick is to try not to take it personally, even though it is directed at you. This involves a shift into a parallel universe which is not too far away, one in which you expect to be abused by an audience and therefore when it happens you're not surprised and you deal with it.

And you can answer back.

In fact, it's expected of you. Think of all the poor sods working in the helping professions – nurses, ambulance men, doctors, receptionists, social workers and many others – who just have to grin and bear it until they go home and get the chance to take it out on their poor, unsuspecting partner, feet up in front of the telly without any culpability for their other half's frustration and bitterness. As a nurse, I used to tell myself that the people who aimed the most vile and revolting abuse at me were ill (even though lots of them weren't; they were just pissed or horrible) and therefore I shouldn't take it personally. To some extent the same goes for hecklers. I just convince myself they are arseholes. This makes it much easier to come back at them with a well-chosen package of abuse.

Sometimes, however, the friendly neighbourhood heckler is replaced by something altogether stranger and scarier. And Loughborough University is a prime example, as an individual, stand-out voice is added to the wave of insults which is coming at me. It is louder, nastier, more insistent and more threatening than the sum of the

somewhat half-hearted attempts at abuse that I have already soaked up.

I hear the words ‘ugly whore’, ‘kill’ and ‘cunt’ in a surreal swirl of noise. The crowd hears them too and turns towards the voice, perhaps hoping it is a disgruntled javelin thrower who might attempt to skewer me. After all, we are at a sporting university, so it’s odds on someone will be good at throwing something, even if it is only abuse. My javelin-throwing days were cut short by a tragic accident in the toilets with a fag and a matchbox. More of that anon. I’d quite like to have a weapon at this point though. I had a recurring dream for a while (sorry, won’t keep you too long, I know how dull other people’s dreams are) that I got heckled, pulled out a gun and shot the heckler. And the audience fell about laughing. Must have been a club in south London.

I wonder if I’m being heckled by the local serial killer and suspect that my more whimsical attempts at a put-down will fall on deaf ears. So I launch in with my most nuclear of come-backs, and if this doesn’t work, I’m history.

‘If you don’t shut your mouth, I’ll sit on your face.’

Yes, I know it’s not the height of Wildean repartee, but it normally stops ’em in their tracks. There is a sort of gasped laugh and then I follow it with what I hope will be the killer finisher. (If you’re reading this, Mum, you’d better have a sit-down.)

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‘No, on second thoughts I won’t sit on your face, because I haven’t got my period at the moment. Doesn’t seem worth it.’

Desired effect achieved temporarily. A smattering of applause, quite a lot of laughter and the sound of a small portion of grudging respect winging in my direction.

And then Mr Psycho Trousers starts up again, more vehement, more homicidal and scarier than before. His desire to see me tortured and dead isn’t the best compliment I’ve ever had on stage and even though I can’t see him, I conjure up a picture of his screwed-up face, misogyny and murderousness combined to make a photo-fit of seething hatred.

It’s strange how much thinking you can actually do when you’re on stage facing an audience. The brain ticks over at a hundred miles an hour: planning, pruning material, changing the order, omitting stuff they’re not going to identify with, like one’s witty five minutes on Delft pottery. While facing Loughborough’s answer to Jack the Ripper, in the micro seconds I have available to up my game, I incongruously find myself musing on insults I have received from blokes in the past. Once, sporting short hair and a man’s jacket, when walking home from university to my luxury shared flat above a chip shop in West Drayton, a charming rural hamlet near Uxbridge, a lorry driver shouted, ‘What’s it like being a bloke?’ out of his cab at me. I just froze, unable to think of a witty reply,

and walked on, head down. Two minutes later, it came to me. I should have walked up to him and shouted, 'I don't suppose you'd know, you creepy bastard' and kicked him in the crossplys.

This is the world of the stand-up. Some sort of superior reply has to be grasped for and delivered in the blink of an eye, and it's bloody difficult to do sometimes. Of course, one's instinct is to just shout the ubiquitous 'fuck off' at them. But crowds these days want more. They want newer, more malevolent put-downs, the verbal equivalent of a blade to the solar plexus.

The combination of Psycho Man's vitriol and the general apathy of the crowd combine to make my temper begin to rise. Why, though?

Haven't I just told you this is the lot of the stand-up? Abuse has to be cleverly parried as we move on to the next joke. Yes, I do believe that, but I also believe there is a limit and as I am beginning to feel as though I am the receptacle for all of this man's hatred towards women, I wonder if this is something any woman should tolerate.

I have always told myself that no performance is worth this sort of emotional pain, even to the point that I get off early and risk losing my money. So throwing out a cheery goodbye along the lines of 'Bollocks to the lot of you!' I exit stage left, rather preferring to be pursued by a bear if the only choice is between it and Psycho Man.

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In the dressing room I find my temper is failing to abate and I wish to do violence. This may be due to the several bottles of Pils I've imbibed pre-show as a warm-up ritual, liquid protector and courage inducer. Mark Lamarr, the compere on this occasion and a good friend, is fulsome in his sympathy. I find myself picking up a bottle and heading towards the door to find and do battle with my tormentor.

To my great surprise, Mark attempts to prevent me. A surprise because I'd assumed he'd be right behind me with a bottle the size of Nelson's Column. He sits me down, gets me a drink and counsels me against smashing a punter round the head with a lager receptacle. I'm not happy. Surely this is deserved? As a woman I've had to put up with this (admittedly mostly lower-level) kind of stuff over the years and it frustrates me enormously that there is no opportunity for comeback at all those van-driving-street-roaming-pissed-up arseholes who feel it's their right to comment on women's physical attributes. Surely I am a righteous representative of the female sex, ready to give my all to even the imbalance?

A few minutes later, I begin to see Mark's point. We have discovered the bloke in question is a security man and, apart from thinking that's a slightly unprofessional way for security to behave, I realise the odds of me getting the better of him in a bottle fight are minimal. And so, as the adrenaline begins to flow away to wherever it goes,

I calm down and try to put it down to experience, whatever that means.

My Uncle Terry was a bouncer for a while in a club in the northeast. Well, he wasn't really my uncle, thank God, I wouldn't have wanted those genes in the family. He was someone my dad knew from 'a while back' (he never went into details). On the few occasions I saw Uncle Terry – and his appearances were rarer than Halley's Comet – he would entertain us children with rather inappropriately violent tales of punters he had mashed up in some way at the portal of the club where he worked. It's a great job for a misanthrope, and Uncle Terry certainly wore that badge. I think it was safe to say he looked for trouble with the enthusiasm of a fully paid-up member of the psychopaths' league. Most of the tales he related were full of blood and gore squirting out of every imaginable orifice, as he pummelled some poor sod who'd had one too many Babychams and got a bit lairy. I suppose the advantage 'doormen' have is that they are sober and ready for it, while your average pummellee is pissed.

I think my favourite story, the one which stuck in my mind, was of a woman who, having witnessed Uncle Terry giving her escort a good hiding, disappeared for half an hour and then came back and charged at him like a wild animal, brandishing, of all things, a kettle in her hand. Nobody knew whether she'd been home for it, nicked it

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from a nearby electrical retailer or just happened to find it on the street. It caught Uncle Terry a glancing blow across the top of the head (he could still rather shamefacedly point to the scar) and he tumbled to the ground, at which point Madam poured the contents of the kettle, thankfully not boiling, over his face and gave him a kick in the bollocks for good measure.

Looking back on this, I'm surprised Uncle Terry told us this story, as it doesn't show him in a good light: a tree trunk of a man being floored by a mere woman with the aid of a household implement. But he was tough all the same, like most security men. The one here in Loughborough is no exception.

I wonder to myself: how the blinking hell did I get here and what am I doing? I could be working in a library or pushing a pram round the park. What is my problem?