

WHAT WOULD

NITE OWL

DO?

SO THERE YOU ARE, ON THE TRAIN FROM WIGAN WALLGATE TO MANCHESTER DEANSGATE, AND YOU'RE TRYING TO EXPLAIN TO MARTIN THAT ALTHOUGH WATCHMEN TAKES PLACE IN THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES, IT'S AN ALTERNATE VISION OF THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES, ONE IN WHICH SUPER-HEROES REALLY EXIST AND CHANGED HISTORY IN BIG WAYS AND SMALL WAYS, LIKE HELPING AMERICA WIN THE VIETNAM WAR AND MAKING IT POSSIBLE FOR ELECTRIC CARS TO REPLACE THE PETROL ENGINE, AND FOR ONCE HE SEEMS TO BE LISTENING TO YOU. FOR ONCE.

YOU TELL HIM HOW WATCHMEN HAS RE-ENERGISED THE GENRE, HOW IT'S BROUGHT THE INDUSTRY TO MAINSTREAM MEDIA ATTENTION, HOW IT'S PROVING ONCE AND FOR ALL THAT COMICS AREN'T JUST FOR KIDS.

-THEY ARE THOUGH, AREN'T THEY? HE SAYS.
-WHAT?
-FOR KIDS. COMICS ARE FOR KIDS. I MEAN, LOOK...

HE GESTURES AT THE COMIC HE'S GOT IN ONE HAND, AND YOU HAVE TO CAREFULLY TAKE IT FROM HIM TO STOP HIM CREASING THE COVER.

-THIS GUY'S ALL BLUE, HE SAYS. -AND THIS ONE'S GOT SOME KIND OF BLOTCHY MASK ON HIS FACE. AND WHAT THE HELL'S THIS GUY SUPPOSED TO BE? A FAT BATMAN OR SOMETHING? FATMAN?
-THAT'S NITE-OWL, YOU SAY, SLIDING THE COMIC BACK INTO ITS PROTECTIVELY-SNUG MYLAR BAG.

-HE'S PRETTY MUCH A NORMAL GUY WHO'S BEEN DRAGGED BACK INTO THE SUPER-HERO THING AFTER HIS FRIENDS STARTED GETTING KILLED.

MARTIN NODS, A SMIRK ON HIS FACE.
-AND HE'S YOUR FAVOURITE, IS HE?
-WHY ARE YOU BOTHERING TO COME WITH ME, THEN, IF ALL YOU'RE GOING TO DO IS TAKE THE PISS? YOU SAY, YOUR CHEEKS REDDENING LIKE THEY ALWAYS DO WHEN YOU GET ANGRY. -YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO COME.

THEN MARTIN'S GOT YOU IN A HEADLOCK AND HE'S RUBBING THE KNUCKLES OF HIS FIST INTO YOUR HAIR, LIKE HE ALWAYS HAS DONE FOR THE PAST TWELVE YEARS, EVER SINCE YOU MET AT PRIMARY SCHOOL.

-OW, YOU SAY, THOUGH HE'S NOT REALLY HURTING YOU. -GET OFF, YOU BIG GAY.
-SOMEONE'S GOT TO LOOK AFTER YOU, HE SAYS. -WHY DO YOU THINK I APPLIED FOR UMIST? SO I CAN KEEP AN EYE ON YOU WHEN YOU'RE FARTING ABOUT ON YOUR MEDIA COURSE AT MANCHESTER POLY.

OUTSIDE, IT'S SUNNY AND HOT AND MANCHESTER HAS THAT SUMMER IN THE CITY SMELL, THE MELTING TARMAC SHIMMERING AND THE UNDERLYING STENCH OF ROTTING TAKEAWAY DEBRIS, THE HEAT OF CAR ENGINES AND THE LINGERING SCENT OF SOMEONE'S PERFUME. MARTIN TAKES A DEEP BREATH AND SMILES.

THE STORY CONTINUES...

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-I LOVE THIS PLACE, HE BEAMS. THE PAVEMENTS IN THE LEE OF THE BUILDINGS ARE COOL AND YOU HOP BETWEEN THE BLOCKS OF SHADOW, TURNING INTO OXFORD STREET AND ITS LANES OF HUMMING TRAFFIC, THE BRITTLE SHOUTS OF OFFICE GIRLS ON THEIR LUNCH HOURS, A SNATCH OF MUSIC FLOATING FROM AN OPEN WINDOW.

-GIRLFRIEND IN A COMA, I KNOW, I KNOW, IT'S SERIOUS, SINGS MARTIN. HE'S LAUGHING AGAIN, BECOMING MORE AND MORE ALIVE WITH EVERY STEP DOWN OXFORD STREET. -THAT'S THE RITZ, DOWN THERE, HE SAYS, AS YOU WAIT AT THE PEDESTRIAN CROSSING. THEY PUT BANDS ON.

WHOSE IDEA WAS MANCHESTER? YOURS OR HIS? IT WAS ALMOST A GIVEN THAT YOU'D END UP GOING TO THE SAME UNIVERSITY, OR AT LEAST THE SAME CITY. YOU'VE DONE EVERYTHING TOGETHER SINCE YOU COULD BARELY WALK. YOU'RE GOING TO TRY TO GET IN THE SAME HALLS OF RESIDENCE. YOU SUPPOSE, AT LEAST. IT HASN'T REALLY BEEN MENTIONED FOR A WHILE.

-HEY LOOK, HE SHOUTS AGAIN. THEY'RE SHOWING BETTY BLUE AT THE CORNERHOUSE. DO YOU FANCY IT?

THE FACT IS, YOU DON'T FANCY WATCHING A FILM IN FRENCH. THE FACT IS, YOU FANCY GETTING TO ODYSSEY 7, GETTING YOUR COPIES OF WATCHMEN SIGNED BY THE CREATORS, BUYING THE COLLECTED VERSION OF THE BOOK THEY'RE DOING THE PROMOTIONAL TOUR FOR, AND MAYBE PICKING UP SOME MORE COMICS. THEN YOU FANCY SITTING DOWN ON A BENCH SOMEWHERE AND READING THEM.

ODYSSEY 7 IS IN THE SHOPPING ARCADE. YOU'VE BEEN HERE MANY TIMES BEFORE. IN FACT, IT'S PRETTY MUCH WHAT INFORMED YOUR DECISION TO APPLY FOR MANCHESTER POLY. IT'S A GOOD SHOP, ODYSSEY 7.

THEY GET ALL THE COMICS IN YOU LIKE TO READ. THEY'RE NOT TOO BITCHY, EITHER, DON'T LOOK AT YOUR SELECTIONS AND SNIFF LIKE THEY DO IN SOME COMICS SHOPS, RAISING AN EYEBROW BECAUSE YOU BOUGHT THE FLASH AND GREEN LANTERN INSTEAD OF LOVE & ROCKETS OR SOME OTHER IMPENETRABLE BLACK-AND-WHITE MAGAZINE IN WHICH NOTHING EVER HAPPENS SOMEWHERE IN SMALL-TOWN AMERICA.

UP THE ESCALATOR, ROUND THE CORNER, AND THERE IT IS. THERE'S A QUEUE; PEOPLE IN COATS TOO THICK FOR THE SUMMER SUN, THEIR HAIR LONG LIKE YOU WANT TO GROW YOURS, THEIR JEANS TOO TIGHT AND TOO SHORT. YOU JOIN THE BACK OF THE QUEUE.

YOU AND MARTIN DON'T DRESS LIKE THESE PEOPLE. YOU DRESS SIMILARLY TO EACH OTHER, BUT THERE SEEM TO BE SUBTLE DIFFERENCES. YOUR T-SHIRT IS TUCKED INTO YOUR JEANS; MARTIN'S HANGS LOOSE. YOUR JEANS HAVE A SHARP CREASE IRONED DOWN THEM BY YOUR MUM; MARTIN'S ARE FLAT AT THE FRONT. YOU WEAR THE BROGUES YOU HAD LAST TERM AT COLLEGE; MARTIN IS SHOD IN BATTERED CONVERSE ALL-STARS. YOUR HAIR IS COMBED AND PARTED AT THE SIDE; MARTIN'S HANGS LOOSE AND CHOPPY OVER HIS FACE. SUBTLE DIFFERENCES.

-HOW LONG IS THIS GOING TO TAKE? MUTTERS MARTIN.
YOU SIGH.
-I TOLD YOU, YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO COME.

OPPOSITE ODYSSEY 7 IS A TRAVEL AGENT'S, AND IN THE WINDOW, AMONG THE POSTERS OFFERING DEALS TO IBIZA AND TENERIFE AND RHODES, THE GIRLS ARE STARING AND POINTING AT THE QUEUE, SOME OF THEM LAUGHING. ONE OF THE GIRLS, WHO HAS LONG, STRAIGHT BROWN HAIR AND A MOLE SURFING THE RAZOR EDGE OF HER CHEEKBONE, COMES TO THE DOORWAY.

-WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? SHE CALLS. THERE'S A COLLECTIVE AVERTING OF EYES AND SHUFFLING OF FEET.

-WE'RE WAITING FOR A WRITER TO SIGN OUR COMICS, SAYS MARTIN. - WHAT'S HIS NAME AGAIN?

-ALAN MOORE, YOU MUTTER - AND THE ARTIST IS DAVE GIBBONS.

MARTIN REPEATS THE NAMES AND STROLLS ACROSS TO TALK TO HER FIVE LONG MINUTES PASS, DURING WHICH TIME YOU JEALOUSLY WISH YOU WERE FURTHER AHEAD IN THE QUEUE SO YOU COULD AT LEAST LOOK AT THE NEW COMICS IN THE SHOP WINDOW, AND HE'S BACK.

-YOU KNOW WHO SHE LOOKS LIKE, YOU WHISPER -WHO? YOU OPEN ONE OF THE WATCHMEN COMICS. -SILK SPECTRE. LOOK, SHE'S GOT THE MOLE AND EVERYTHING.

MARTIN LAUGHS. -HER NAME'S MICHELLE. SHE'S A STUDENT AT THE POLY, SECOND YEAR. SHE SAYS IT'S GREAT HERE, AND GUESS WHAT?

-WHAT?

-SHE'S MEETING HER MATE FOR A PINT IN THE PUB ACROSS THE ROAD WHEN SHE GETS OFF IN TEN MINUTES. THEY'VE GOT A HOUSE AND TWO PEOPLE HAVE JUST LEFT. THEY'RE LOOKING FOR TWO NEW HOUSEMATES. I SAID WE'D GO FOR A DRINK WITH THEM AND TALK ABOUT IT.

-I THOUGHT WE WERE GOING TO LIVE IN HALLS, YOU SAY. -

YEAH, BUT JASE, A HOUSE. HIS VOICE DROPS TO AN URGENT WHISPER -AND LOOK AT HER AHEAD OF YOU, THERE IS GROWING EXCITEMENT. SOMEONE'S OPENING THE DOORS TO ODYSSEY 7.

-LOOK, SAYS MARTIN, AS SILK SPECTRE OR MICHELLE OR WHATEVER HER NAME IS EMERGES FROM THE SHOP, WEARING A LIGHT CARDIGAN OVER HER TRAVEL AGENT'S UNIFORM AND CARRYING A CROCHETED BAG.

-YOU GET YOUR COMICS SIGNED AND COME OVER TO THE PUB. YOU CAN'T MISS IT, APPARENTLY. IT'S FULL OF STUDENTS. THEY'LL HAVE THE SMITHS ON THE JUKEBOX.

AS HE GOES YOU DON'T KNOW WHETHER YOU'RE RELIEVED OR ANGRY, GLAD OR JEALOUS. BUT THEN THERE'S NO TIME TO PONDER AS THE QUEUE SHUFFLES FORWARD. THERE'S A LIGHT, FLAPPING THING IN YOUR BREAST. YOU'RE ABOUT TO MEET ALAN MOORE.

HE'S EXACTLY AS YOU EXPECT, WHEN YOU FINALLY GET TO SEE HIM AS THE LINE SHUNTS YOU ALONG WITH A SLUGGISH PERISTALSIS. HE'S BIG AND BEARDED AND HIS HAIR IS WILD AND BLACK, LIKE A DARK MAGICIAN'S. DAVE GIBBONS, THE ARTIST, SEEMS MORE NORMAL, MORE EVERYDAY. BUT ALAN MOORE IS LIKE ONE OF HIS OWN COMIC CREATIONS, LARGER THAN LIFE, DRAWN WITH EXAGGERATED STROKES.

THEY'RE SITTING BEHIND THE COUNTER, CLEARED OF THIS WEEK'S COMICS AND TRADING CARDS AND ACTION FIGURES. YOU TAKE THE THICK, TELEPHONE DIRECTORY SIZED COPY OF WATCHMEN FROM THE PILE AND PRESENT IT TO THEM, ALONG WITH THE INDIVIDUAL ISSUES YOU'VE COLLECTED MONTH AFTER MONTH.

YOU SAY, -IT WAS AMAZING. WATCHMEN. IT WAS AMAZING. THANK YOU.

YOU'RE REALLY TALKING TO ALAN MOORE, WHO NODS AS HE SCRAWLS HIS NAME ACROSS THE INSIDE OF THE BOOK, BUT DAVE GIBBONS ANSWERS, -THANK YOU.

YOU WANT TO SAY MORE, BUT SUDDENLY YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY. ALL THOSE THINGS YOU WANTED TO TELL ALAN MOORE, LIKE HOW YOU WANT TO BE A COMIC WRITER LIKE HIM, LIKE HOW YOU THINK HE'S DONE A MARVELLOUS JOB REVITALISING THE OLD SWAMP THING COMIC, LIKE HOW YOU ARE WONDERING JUST WHERE HE'S GOING TO TAKE V FOR VENDETTA.

ALL THOSE THINGS JUST EVAPORATE IN YOUR MIND AND YOU SIMPLY SMILE AND NOD UNTIL THEY HAND YOU BACK YOUR SIGNED COMICS AND YOU MOVE ALONG, AND SOMEONE ELSE BEHIND YOU IS GETTING THEIR COMICS SIGNED AND ASKING QUESTIONS YOU WISHED YOU'D ASKED.

CONTINUED...

YOU MOOCH ABOUT IN ODYSSEY 7 FOR A BIT, LOOKING AT THE NEW COMICS, BUYING MORE THAN YOU CAN REALLY AFFORD, BUT HOW CAN YOU NOT, WHEN THEY DRAW YOU IN WITH THEIR HYPNOTIC, BRIGHTLY-COLOURED COVERS HIDING MODERN MYTHS SPRUNG FULL-BLOWN FROM THE BROWS OF CONTEMPORARY ZEUSES?

MAYBE AN HOUR HAS PASSED WHEN YOU GET OUTSIDE. THE SUN IS STILL HIGH IN THE BLUE SKY. IT'S AUGUST NINETEEN-EIGHTY-SEVEN BUT IT COULD BE ANYTIME FOR YOU, TRAPPED LIKE A FLY IN THE AMBER OF YOUR FINAL SUMMER AT HOME, YOUR GUTS SECRETLY TURNING TO WATER AT THE THOUGHT OF POLY. ACROSS THE ROAD IS THE PUB. YOU SHOULD GO ACROSS, HAVE A PINT, TALK ABOUT THIS HOUSE, MEET MICHELLE AND HER MATE. YOU SHOULD.

BUT BACK ALONG OXFORD STREET, IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROYAL NORTHERN COLLEGE OF MUSIC, IS A WOODEN BENCH. AND BEFORE YOU KNOW IT YOU'RE SITTING THERE, PULLING OUT YOUR COMICS, RUNNING YOUR FINGERS OVER THE FAINT IMPRINT LEFT BY ALAN MOORE'S PEN. AND THEN YOU'RE LOST IN THE BOOK ONCE AGAIN, AND ANOTHER HOUR HAS CRAWLED BY.

YOU BECOME AWARE OF SOMEONE STANDING THERE. IT'S GOING TO BE MARTIN, YOU THINK IN THE SECOND BEFORE YOU LOOK UP, ANGRY AND DISAPPOINTED IN YOU. YOU'LL HAVE A SULKY CONVERSATION ON THE WAY BACK TO THE TRAIN.

-YOU'RE NOT LIKE YOU USED TO BE, YOU'LL FINALLY FIND THE COURAGE TO SAY. -YOU'VE CHANGED. AND HE'LL SAY BACK, JUST AS YOU KNOW HE WILL, -AND YOU HAVEN'T. THAT'S THE PROBLEM. BUT IT ISN'T MARTIN. IT'S... FOR A MOMENT, YOU WONDER IF YOU'VE DOZED OFF ON THE BENCH AND ARE DREAMING. BUT THERE THEY ARE, ALAN MOORE AND DAVE GIBBONS, SMILING DOWN AT YOU.

-ENJOYING THE BOOK? ASKS DAVE GIBBONS. YOU NOD DUMBLY.

-ARE YOU A STUDENT HERE? HE SAYS.

YOU SHAKE YOUR HEAD. -NEXT TERM.

-GOOD PLACE, HE SAYS, LOOKING AROUND.

-YOU'LL ENJOY IT.

ALAN MOORE IS LOOKING AT YOU. -THERE'S SUPPOSED TO BE A GOOD MEXICAN AROUND HERE. DO YOU KNOW IT?

YOU POINT DOWN OXFORD ROAD, BACK TOWARDS THE CITY CENTRE. -I THINK IT'S DOWN THERE, ON THIS SIDE OF THE ROAD.

-THANKS, SAYS DAVE GIBBONS. AND THEY WALK OFF.

YOU WATCH THEIR RECEDING BACKS. YOU LOOK ACROSS THE ROAD TO THE PUB.

YOU ARE LIKE A CHARACTER WRITTEN BY ALAN MOORE. YOU HAVE A CHOICE FACING YOU, A WORLD-SHATTERING, LIFE-CHANGING CHOICE. JUST LIKE NITE-OWL AT THE END OF WATCHMEN. YOU CAN GO ACROSS THE ROAD AND HAVE THAT PINT, TALK TO THE GIRL, FACE UP TO WHAT'S COMING. OR YOU CAN FOLLOW ALAN MOORE AND TELL HIM AGAIN HOW MUCH YOU LIKE HIS COMICS, HOW YOU WANT TO BE A WRITER, HOW HE SHOULD TAKE YOU ON AS HIS SIDEKICK AND TEACH YOU ALL HE KNOWS AND YOU CAN CREATE WONDERFUL COMICS JUST LIKE HIM.

YOU LOOK BACK TO THE PUB.

YOU LOOK AT ALAN MOORE AND DAVE GIBBONS. AND THE ONLY THING YOU CAN THINK IS, WHAT WOULD NITE-OWL DO? ASNS

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