



It all went wrong when we listened to the man on the bus. Should have known better, he was a little too eager and a little too polished. "Where you off to, then?" he asked. "London," we politely replied. "Aye, you're taking the O'Hare Cosmodrome option then, are ye?" "What?" This should have been the first clue.

"Oh, the Cosmodrome option. It's the latest. Why they zip you up in a tube, they do, and fire you off, and before you know it you're cross the pond and happy as a lark on Carnaby Street!"

"You must be joking," we said in a mixture of astonishment and incredulity.

Look, it is all so easy when you travel. You seem to trust people in a whole different way, people you have never met before. The seat-mate on the bus, the person at the airport bar with whom you take turns watching bags and sluffing off to the loo to discharge the extra baggage earned waiting for your too late flight. Call it traveler's camaraderie or Stockholm syndrome. You are all in it together, after all, and so you adjust the normal boundaries of life to accommodate this different reality made up of train stations, airports and motor coach life. We listened to him for a while, and as he spoke we found it all making more and more sense. The Russians, it seems, had quite taken to the idea of lofting people into space for fun and profit, and had apparently made a deal with one Richard M. Daley to equip his beloved O'Hare International Airport with the necessary accouterments to launch such a service. All made sense to us.

Before you know it the die was cast and we were to be SBT (space borne tourist) class travelers. We got badges with little antennae rather than boarding passes, and we queued when told, and we all went the same, egalitarian, class. Signs of Old Russia here. The drinks were good, however, so that helped. Next thing we knew we were loaded into a tube, trundled out to a launch pad somewhere between Kirghistan and Peoria and fired into space like the human cannonball at a county fair.

It was X who was first to express doubt as to the wisdom of this plan. It was somewhere

between the signing of the waivers and the strapping into our "flight suits" (they looked suspiciously like straight jackets). "I don't know about this, Nic. What was so bad about a red eye into Heathrow, anyway?"

So now we sit, eating like astronauts, little tubes of chicken and lasagna to suck on, globules of salad dressing drifting in the air. "Watch out for the 'whipped spread'," warns X, "It's entirely melted and scalding hot." She was right, of course, I quickly realized as I pierced the foil lid and it sprayed into my face. Clingy stuff, that hot, whipped, spread.

"Love and Quiches!" read the label on the brownie. Sure enough, you could feel the love that went into the...packaging. By the time I had the little bugger open it was all a big chocolate schmear...Okay, I was all a big chocolate schmear. In the epic struggle of man v. cellophane it was the cellophane what won.

Must sign off now, dinner is over and time to put the ~~straight jacket~~ flight suit back on. Will write more after splash down. Just hoping we're closer to Wapping than Vladivostok. Ta!