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Danny Smith: On Holiday By Mistake

23 February 2011

By Danny Smith

Routine crushes me, most of the time I can feel its weight on my chest. When it really takes hold I start getting odder and odder thoughts compelling me to something dumb, dangerous or both. I can mitigate these brain whispers by smaller and regular spur of the moment decisions: change the way I walk home, buy gum instead of crisps or split up with my girlfriend and quit my job. Saturday was an example of one of these mild but weird decisions.

I went to Coventry

After a truly desperate tweet born of lazy exasperation Twitter swami Pete Ashton suggested I visit the Herbert museum which had an Egypt exhibition on. All seeing Pete obviously knew about my brief obsession with all things Egypt that I had in my teenage years so my Saturday was set. Coventry by reputation is terrible, the buildings grey, its people ugly as sin's older sister with a hare lip and ginger hair, and its cathedral roofless. Even the vague memories I had of Coventry are uninspiring, last time I went—which must be close to five years ago—I described it as 'a ring road moat of shit circling a castle of closed shops' which may have been less than fair.

The first thing I noticed was how quick the journey is, no more than half hour by train. That's still time enough to get enormously aroused by a student wearing pastel pink Doc Martens and then enormously turned off by an old woman eating a banana with enough furious appetite—I still expect to pop up on a hidden camera show. Going by train adds a glamour to anything, I defy anyone to not to get misty-eyed watching Birmingham recede into the background as they stare at the scars around their eyes in the reflection of the train window listening to Southern Horror-core Rap.

Coventry train station is a short walk out of the city, on the other side of the afore mentioned 'ring road moat', in the sort of outer city hinterland that struggles with any sort of use. When emerging from the subway and getting to the centre proper I was confronted with the blue denim, cap, and sportswear, of a middle aged soccer casual as he and his friends pissed against a Methodist church. Not the greatest of starts.

And then I stumbled into a shopping centre, it seems that Coventry since I last had been has had a massive redevelopment, now the shops were of course the same shops as any other city centre in England, but a massive amount of independents as well. The difference was massive and disorientating. Out of sheer luck I stumbled into Coventry market, a market somewhere between the Rag Market and InShops, built on a circular floor plan which made only further disorientated my fragile mind.

Struggling, I followed the signs for the Cathedral, the only fixed point in space I knew having been there as a scout fifteen years ago. On finding it I was struck by the sense of peace there, not only relief of not being lost, but because they have done a such a good job of preserving the place. Ruins bore most people with good reason—ruins are, on the whole, boring. But the context of this structure added gravitas and the weight of recent history was very present. It took little to look up and imagine a sky on fire, and the percussive blasts hitting the occupants like punches to the chest. You could smell the charring and imagine stepping over the beams. But it was also humbling, the message of the Cathedral is overwhelmingly one of forgiveness and humanity's capacity to learn from our terrible mistakes. It was nice being there, and nice to see it being used as a meeting place, an area where people eat lunch and put their own problems in the frame of history.

I also climbed the tower. Upon reflection climbing 180 steps of a structure that was near medieval and had once been blown up could have been a terrible decision. But using the the mantra 'buyer doesn't have to beware because if it was dangerous then they would be allowed to sell it me in the first place' I climbed the steps and saw exactly how much Coventry had changed. Half the city was new, it arced and flowed in concrete and glass the way that current architecture does. Having caught the only sunny day in a winter of shadows and snow I was afforded views as far out as the landscape allowed. I also was able to see that the Herbert museum happened to be right next to the cathedral saving me from at least of half an hour of wandering.

The museum was a great modern building and seemed very proud of its award for being the most patronising in the country or something. I'm not against making things kid friendly, but making them exclusively for children with only a cursory nod to adults makes you no better than a Pixar movie knock off. Is it wrong to want your museums grand? With a certain amount of reverence to the work they contain? Okay catering in museums to children will briefly divert them from their Nintendo 3D hand-held shuffle pods but cuddly building block sculptures and works of art done completely in textures can only compete so far. And my point is they shouldn't have to compete, there should be a sense of reverence and respect when dealing with these things and if kids find it boring? Good. Children need to learn to be bored. Not everything is going to have a fun worksheet you can fill in with stickers or a talking dog to distract them. Some things are important enough that you won't understand it the first three or four times, some things should be revered and explained with dignity not with a touch screen interface or an animation.

The Egyptian exhibition was interesting but in its eagerness to make things accessible they glossed over the deeper history, there was a wide selection of items hidden behind the dress up boxes and 'touch this now' stands. A great example of this was the mummified remains they had hidden by a screen wall and an option to go around for the faint of age. The hilarious thing being the remains were not even on display, the casket was open and a inoffensive bandaged lump that may have been human shaped inside. I've worked with kids of various abilities on and off all my life, if you want to divert them, talk to them. You want to get through to them? Talk to the person they can and want to be.

I spent the rest of the day looking around and thankfully there is more to Coventry than a huge modern shopping complex, I recommend the medieval shop at Spon Street, the collection of bars and, of course, the Cathedral. The two most shocking things? It's far from terrible and it's close. A short train journey away and you can be in a completely new city worth exploring.

People from Birmingham ARE more attractive though.

The opinions of Danny Smith do not necessarily reflect the views of the publishers of this blog, its affiliates, or any sane adult human being. He currently lives in your cupboard, watching, always watching. With his Herbert in his hand.

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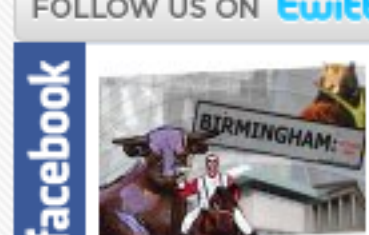
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