



Heartbreak Hill

For the past nine years, I've spent two hours a week at a volunteer job on Capitol Hill. When I tell the newer counselors when I started they exclaim, "Nine years?"

You must've seen everything!" I wonder how Parisians—or Athenians—must feel when they visit America and see our shop signs: MURRAY AND SONS, EST. 1957.

Nine years is nothing, yet in official Washington, outlasting an administration is an accomplishment. Capitol Hill is the place where the cliché that Washington is a transient town becomes most vivid. The groups colonizing familiar corners of the Hawk and Dove bar shift and change, faces vanishing and getting replaced like the parts of the philosopher's axe. Then summertime comes—intern season! Unleashed by the colleges on an unsuspecting nation, they move in cheery, callow packs through the think tanks and congressional offices and happy hours. These bright bits of sparkly fluff are the happiest boys and girls in Washington. They've never heard the phrase "West Germany" and think Al Gore was the candidate of a "humble foreign policy." I'll never understand the sexual appeal of interns. Although they clearly have something—in college we'd joke about the incoming class of "refreshments"—they're about as sexy and as knowing as a lollipop.

In election season, you work around the clock, downing beers in the office as you watch the results come in. In the off-season, well, there's a reason they call it "recess."

This is the place with "Southern efficiency and Northern charm," the place nobody should live too long—"inside

the Beltway." When people move here, burn out, and write whining columns for the *New York Times* about "life in Washington," this is where they lived. (So it's their own fault.)

But even in Washington-the-dateline, you can catch glimpses of D.C. the hometown. Even in the neighborhood of white domes and guided tours, eternally misguided D.C. wanders in: a deer broke through a plate-glass window once and staggered through the Capitol like a Saturday night in Adams Morgan. In 2002, a fox sneaked into the Supreme Court building. Security cameras caught the fox entering, but no fox ever left. Local legend suggests that it evaded capture by turning into Justice Scalia.

In Union Station, the interns stand left and walk right in defiance of local escalator culture. Deaf students from Gallaudet University mall-rat in sign language. Walking east, you slip into a neighborhood of young families and group housing—two kinds of each. One kind of young family wields giant canvas-hooded strollers of German construction, Baby's First SUV. The other young families, with their stronghold farther east, push castoff strollers from cousins. In one kind of group home, friends band together to share expenses, host art shows in the living room, park a tiny backyard grill at the top of the fire escape, and fight about the refrigerator. In the other kind, a group home is the place where your case-worker will discuss whether or not they have to let you in.

D.C. is mostly a springtime town, but I've found that Capitol Hill is most beautiful in the early summer twilight. Northeast of the train station is the neighborhood where I usually see the first mulberries of the season, and then the first fireflies, and then the first bees. As the sun sinks below the skyline of official Washington, the night-blooming flowers lift and unfurl their graceful white trumpets. The neighborhood smells like honeysuckle and cheap barbecue, overblown roses and thin cigars.

This place feels safe to me, even though the volunteers from Maryland or Virginia insist on driving me to the subway after dark. In D.C. safety is a sliding scale. There are two women who sit on their stoop here, smoking and muttering dark imprecations like the Graeae missing a sister. Sometimes, when they're especially outgoing, they vulture for spare change from passersby. On bad days, they scream at their neighbors and make physical threats. When Jane Jacobs praised urban neighborhoods with "eyes on the street," I don't think the Weird Sisters were what she had in mind.

Is Capitol Hill safe? Is anywhere? It was in this neighborhood that a young receptionist took me aside and lifted up the back of her blouse so I could see the bruises she'd taken from her boyfriend. "Do you think it's a problem? I mean, I know I should leave him, but ... do you think it's really a problem?" Dateline Washington has its young people—so, for our sins, does hometown D.C.

Official Washington can disappoint you, but only home can break your heart. ■

Sour Vintage

Raising a glass to Kingsley Amis

By Geoffrey Wheatcroft

IN THE LAST CENTURY, English writers came in crops or vintages. Maybe the greatest was the first, born in the reign of Edward VII during the first decade of the century: Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, and Anthony Powell all began life within 30 months of one another. Then there was the crop born in the years after World War II: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, and Ian McEwan.

In between had been another generation, flanked by the wars. Two names in particular stand out: Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, both born in 1922. Unlike the vintage of 20 years earlier, they came from modest lower-middle-class homes and didn't attend public schools (as the English call elite private boarding schools), but they went to Oxford, where they met at St John's College in 1941.

They remained close friends for more than 40 years, not meeting often—Larkin always lived a long way from London and Swansea, when Amis was there in the 1950s—but corresponding in letters that were scabrous and indecent, childish but funny. Both men were insular to the point of xenophobia: Amis had a couple of spells at American colleges, Princeton in the late 1950s, Vanderbilt ten years later, but didn't return, not least because an acute fear of flying meant he could only travel by sea. Larkin never visited the United States.

Their friendship ended only when Amis stood in the pulpit of St. Mary the Virgin in Cottingham, a Yorkshire village church, one chilly December day in 1985 and gave a touching and percep-

tive funeral address for his oldest friend. Larkin had died of cancer. Ten years on, Amis died at 73. He had no specific illness but, weakened by many years of intimate acquaintance with the bottle, was carried away by a bout of pneumonia.

By the time both died, they were famous, though not quite as they had once hoped. Amis originally wanted to be a poet and published a few volumes of poetry, but became a novelist. Larkin wanted to be a novelist and published two early novels, but became a poet. It was Amis who was first established as a "celebrity writer," his opinions eagerly sought by newspapers. A collection of interviews has just been published as *Conversations with Kingsley Amis* (edited by Thomas DePietro, University Press of Mississippi), and they bring out much of what was most memorable about him, though that means the bad as well as the good.

Myself a generation younger, I got to know them both when they were middle-aged. I knew Amis quite well from the 1970s, Larkin only slightly and later on, thanks to Amis. By then they were both in the process of turning into caricatures, as writers sometimes do—Larkin the miserly misanthrope, Amis the cantankerous curmudgeon. All the same, each left behind a real body of work.

How had they got there? Unfit for military service, Larkin graduated from Oxford and became a librarian, his day job for the rest of his life. Amis joined the army in 1942, served in Normandy as

a signals officer, returned to Oxford after the war, and became an academic, appointed lecturer in English in 1949 at what was then University College of Swansea. That was also the year his second son, Martin, was born. Amis and Hilary Bardwell, his first wife, had two sons, and then a daughter. Her birth in 1954 inspired Larkin's beautiful little poem "Born Yesterday":

May you be ordinary;
Have, like other women,
An average of talents:
Not ugly, not good-looking,
Nothing uncustomary
To pull you off your balance.

That hope was belied by Sally's very sad short life, but that's a story for her brother Martin to tell, as he has.

Although Swansea had its share of insufferably pompous persons of the type Amis lethally pinned down as Professor Welch in *Lucky Jim*, his first novel, the germ of that book was actually a visit to Larkin at University College, Leicester, where he then worked: "The young man surrounded by bores who for various reasons he doesn't dare to offend."

What might be called the varsity novel was well established in England, often marked by lushly sentimental reminiscence of gilded undergraduate life, as in *Sinister Street* by Compton Mackenzie or Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*. But Amis's *Lucky Jim* was something quite new, the English campus novel. That novelty was one reason the book was a