

# Mo Foster: Teddy Boys' Picnic/A Blues For Shindig

Mo Foster's *A Blues for Shindig* novel and *Teddy Boys' Picnic* shortstory take place in 1956-57, acting as a prequel to Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* as they set the scene in Notting Hill in the run up to the 1958 riots. *A Blues for Shindig* features the local druggie underworld that revolved around the Notting Hill Gate Joe Lyons café on the site of Waterstones bookshop, Harry Wragg's café on All Saints Road, and the greasy spoon café on the corner of Ladbroke Grove and Lancaster Road. Mo introduces herself and the area at the time saying she was 'around that scene where Teds beat up on blacks regularly. As I lived by Latimer Road station I had to brave Ted territory to get to the taxi rank on Ladbroke Grove. Hairy!' Of the era, she recalls: 'It is largely forgotten and can induce yawning but it was important in marking out the 60s. Naturally it fascinates me as it was if not my finest hour then one of the most fun times. But the racism was profound then, a lot of it unthinking and all the worse for that. The Teds would probably have directed their malice at any target that happened along but the general acceptance of racism was what allowed the riot to happen. The police in particular for the most part were racist, did little to defuse things and gave tacit support to the Teds.'

## Teddy Boys' Picnic by Mo Foster

The Teds move in packs round our way in west London. Flocks might be a better word, they are very birdlike. They strut with skinny drainpipe legs, big chicken feet crepes, chests thrown out and hair a coxcomb. They chirp out insults from the sides of their beaks. Where I live, in Latimer Road, they are even brave in twos. Ten minutes down the road in Ladbroke Grove they become moorhens as they scuttle into the tube station. There is a sort of low key war that reaches a crescendo on a Friday or Saturday night after the pubs shut and they are brave. Then it is perilous for any black to be out. They find mixed couples a particular affront. Marauding army of disaffected young males of indefinite species looking for a focus for their frustration or a shower of bastards? Matter of opinion, don't matter a lot really. Just means it is ultra dodgy to venture abroad on the streets at night. Our house is the only one in the road owned by a black geezer, some of the neighbours find our presence an aggravation, most don't care. The house leans on the bridge by Latimer Road station. When a train goes over the bridge the entire house spasms, if you spill a drink on my floor it runs down gently to the bridge side. The house appears to be melting softly into the ground, the basement has saturated walls but nobody lives in the basement so who cares?

Our landlord is a lawyer from West Africa, he is finishing his studies. A tolerant fellow, his wife is a formidably serious white woman. I live in the front room downstairs and my mate has the top floor with her two kids. In between are a whole group of small island men who speak a weird French dialect. For some reason which I never knew or have forgotten we have a feud going strong with all these fellows. It makes life interesting and does no harm. We shriek in our different languages with vast energy at each other, mostly over the sink in the basement, or the stove. We point vigorously at the gas meter, the coal hole, the back lavatory and we accuse them of thieving – gas, coal, bog roll – not sure what they are saying and as neither group admits to understanding the other it is an exercise in futility that we all enjoy. One tiny guy will put his face right up to mine and we yell merrily for moments, then we stalk away cursing. These guys love my mate's kids and talk to them and give them sweets, when we show up they scowl and leave.

So that's the background here's the story: Me and the feller, after an evening of carousing with some wine and Bourbon and a little dope, decide to take a chance on a wander down the Grove for a taxi at about half eleven. It's a Saturday night and we are for the Mapleton up west. Slightly drunk and a touch stoned we slide round the corner giggling, nervous. Berry is the feller of the moment, a pleasant black Yank with whom I am temporarily engaged in a dalliance, and very nice too. We get half way down the road and are beginning to feel safe when we hear "Fucking niggers" and three white geezers of the Ted persuasion appear from round a corner. I've got a mouth on me, so I bellow back and we carry on shouting for a moment or two. I realise that Berry is not saying a lot but I can't stop and I continue with the verbals. They suddenly make a rush for us and I get carried away with my own verbosity and hear my foolish voice saying "You'll have to get through me first." My fear of cowardice drowns out my terror. Another, simultaneous voice in my head says "Do leave off! You silly cow!"

These lads have absolutely no trouble in getting through me, indeed it is a pleasure. One knocks me down flat with the merest side blow. I get up speedily, to give them my thoughts on racism. He comes back and gives me a resounding kick in the crotch, I bend over and vomit. This appears to repel him and he backs

away, afraid of getting his shoes spotted perhaps? I can't stop staring at him. His whole face seems to be hurrying forward towards his nose, all the features trying to be at the very front. His beady eyes rush to each other in their effort to outpace the other parts, the whole effect is incredibly foxlike, I find it surprising that his nose is not black and shiny. The other two come back declaring that the "nigger" has disappeared. They stand and wave their shoulder pads about a bit and tell me that if they ever see that coon again etc. I just sit on the pavement in my brand new pink and grey pure cotton-by-Horrockses frock that is going to be ruined by the blood and vomit and I see that my gunmetal slash – toed high heeled pumps have lost a heel and I cry. The Teds look exceedingly pissed off at having their sport cut short but they leave. Home to mum?

I stagger up inelegantly and with murderous thoughts I go in search of Berry. He emerges from a basement with cobwebs in his hair and a grin on his face. I hardly know what to say but I make an effort to share my feelings on being deserted, can't think where I got my immaculate taste in men. We discuss and decide to continue up west, I remove my shoes and Berry carries them. I borrow his handkerchief and remove the evidence of vomit from my skirt. The lights are so dim in the club, nobody will notice, and what the fuck anyway. I have become a little delirious and now feel like a heroine: My painful groin? A badge of honour. See me? I'm a strutter, a stalker a very fast walker. I struggle along hanging on to Berry's arm moving like an old woman. I wonder if a fractured groin is a feasibility. Berry is being all consummate caring creature, I find it marginally more repulsive than his late desertion. A car drives along beside us, I stiffen until I hear Cody's voice and see his big old face hanging out the window grinning at me: "Hello darling, still with your Yankee man him?" Disparaging directed at Berry, who doesn't realise. The car has in it Sonny and Sports, a Jamaican contingent of ruffians of the finest kind. I begin to tell them what happened with the Teds and Berry joins in. Too ashamed to say he lit out I listen to his edited version, this guy has a future in fiction!

"Come now!" and we jump in and off we go in search, a tiny marauding army of the opposition. Round the back doubles, not a Ted to be seen. Certainly not our three, in fact nary a one, a Ted free zone. My own enthusiasm ebbs as the other's grows, Berry is avid for blood, Cody hums gently to himself, I sing along: "Feel so fine know that I'm on your mind, come let me hug ya, come let me kiss ya come let me see what I been missin' feels so good now that you come back home." "There they are!" Hear Berry. Three types emerging from an alley doing up their pants. The motor has stopped, the four of them out and the Teds moving – fast in the opposite direction – all before I've closed my mouth from singing. Clever of Berry to have recognised them, surprised he even saw them the first time around. The scene is one of pure mayhem. Limbs whirling, nasty sounds of fists thumping on flesh, gasps and roars, swearing and general nastiness. They all appear to be having a wonderful time and I feel no inclination to join in. Feel I've done my bit for the year.

Finally, back to the car with them, the three Teds totalled on the deck. Or if not totalled then definitely going nowhere for a long time. The boys are so pleased with themselves, delighted with their prowess as human beings. Berry shows me his split knuckles with pride, tells me he got one of them on the snout. I conjecture was it old foxy face? Don't care a lot either way. We are all for the club now. Up Lancaster Road and past the greasy spoon on the corner. The guys are still discussing their battle in glowing terms, like being with four returning crusaders. Those mothers won't mess with blacks from now on, we kicked their arse good, see his face when, did you hear him when? Stuff like that, never seen Berry so animated. Cody hates Yanks, now he's buddy buddy with Berry. They appear to have forgotten me entirely. Up Westbourne Park Road and on the corner by the convent stand Foxy face and his two mates, they wave their fists and yell abuse as we pass. Ah well, one Ted's much like another.

# A Blues for Shindig by Mo Foster EXTRACTS

## **CLUBBING ON A FRIDAY**

...Tonight it's the Sunset Club in Carnaby Street. The only place to be. Half the black population of London fetches up here weekends, along with hookers and hustlers of every kind you've ever seen, and some you haven't. The singer performs with lewd and languid energy. Slow, but emphatic. Her mouth is close to the mic, the last line a camp screech. Before midnight and the club is half empty. It is dark enough to stumble, dark enough to pour hard liquor into soft drinks with ease. The smell is of Dixie Peach, Old Spice, clean flesh and inflammable hair laquer from back combed confections. Several perfumes fight it out for supremacy and the whole is topped off with a dense fug of cigarette smoke shot through with pungent dope. Friday night aroma.....

Inside, The Mapleton is seriously devoted to jazz, among other things. In the centre of the floor are many chairs set out in totally straight lines and occupied by the jazz cognoscenti: serious characters who make not a sound neither do they move. They sit and they watch. Every move of every musician is given attention, and they give silent small nods of approval and quiet applause at a spectacular achievement of finesse. Bass solos are greeted with a degree of concentration that could split the atom, drum solos accompanied by tiny movements of parts of bodies in synch... I walk softly past them, stand at the back. I am a woman of little discrimination and less expertise about jazz, an obvious person. Love it all: sexy sax, strident trumpet, cool clarinet. But the blues are my thing. Along with a million other birds I want to *BE* Billie. Meanwhile at the edges of the dance floor quiet hubbub rules as the crew waits for between sets music so they can dance along, show off, feel up and make out. Knocking shop meets salon here at the Mapleton...

**JUNKIE BLUES** ...Hip is not the word that would come to mind when you go to Joe Lyons at the Gate; meeting and gathering spot for serious junk heads. Characters I don't know or want to know are now my eager mates. Junkies give friendship on the end of a needle, share a spoon with a nodding acquaintance, welcome you into their midst like no other group in the world. They clasp you to their foetid bosom with joy. The more the merrier, leave nobody outside their circle. Colette has appeared among us and stayed on when the studs got a pad round Pembridge Gardens. First week I watch the other three as they crank up, vomit, gouch out. Next week I try it for myself and I can see the fascination. But not as my only love, eh? As a part time amour maybe. Besides, I am busy with the fringe benefits that Berry brought along. More booze and fags appear so I am working harder, making more bread. More wraps of dope and fifths of liquor are buzzing into and out of the base...

But I'm only dabbling to be cool, aren't I? In Joe Lyons on a very ordinary morning, Tony the dealer comes back to speak on his way out. An honour for me. He squats on the edge of a chair like a buzzard, his hands filthy claws. I've been buying stuff for all of us from him. He must see a future in me. "Bell me." Gives me the number on a fag packet. Looks at me out of his rheumy young eyes, no interest, no expression at all. Got to be the worst Joe Lyons in the universe this one. Hell's waiting room. You got all the junkies hanging out, tight packed bowels giving out unique farts. Throats retching gently, waiting to score. Keeping the tone consistent, the whiskery bevy merchants looking like seven kinds of bone shaking death waiting for the boozier to open. One or two rancid scrubbers left over from the night before, tea leaves and wannabe ponces dotted among the legit housewives with scruffy pushchairs and smelly brats noising up the place. Trudy back at the table chucks the matches down, scratches her nose with the back of her hand. Rummages on the table. "Got a snout?"...

## **AFTER THE PARTY ( IT'S A POOR RAT THAT AINT GOT BUT ONE HOLE)**

Angelo hits her with the handbag again. Lyn whacks me one so I bring my knee up, then it's all over and we three are out in Linden Gardens. We run as quickly as the high heels and sheaths allow and don't stop laughing until we get to the all night café in Notting Hill... "You're a bit tasty in a bundle, Angelo." BB looks proud and gives him a kiss on his chops. "We'll have none of that in here, thank you!" From the filthy git who runs the joint and regularly panders birds, flogs drugs and grasses people up... On the pavement we reflect. "I'm hungry. Thought they'd have had some food at Lyn's."... "Better not lig about in the street too long or we'll get nicked for impersonation." We stop the first taxi, go down to Westbourne Grove. "Malibu, cabby." "Right you are, gels." He gives the regulation lewd wink. Then: "Never guess who I had in here earlier on." BB wrecks his night by naming the cabinet minister at the party... The club is jumping, the music meets us half way, slips into our bones and we start to gyrate to Elvis. Girls and boys in drag, femmes, butches, everything in between, some like me who don't know if we're Arthur or Martha...

### **THE SUNNY SIDE OF THE STREET**

We arrive at Lyons at the Gate. The usually near moribund crowd is buzzing like so many bluebottles, the excitement is palpable. Soon as we get through the door it all goes quiet. A hundred distorted pupils peer at us in various stages of dilation. Some from behind shades. Some in full, wincing, daylight. Trudy lifts her skeletal frame and jerks towards us. "So, you been up the nick to see him have you?" Freda joins her; the old guard united for once. Both scrutinize our faces intently. I can feel Angelo tremble. "They don't know, dolly," says Freda. They look at each other like they're deciding who should have the joy of enlightening us. Trudy wins the toss. "They've topped Victoria." "Died in the cells" says Freda with gloomy relish. Both of them watch our faces with keen interest...

### **CELL BOUND BLUES**

The flat in Pembridge Gardens seems to have got damper in the few days we haven't been there. Grey mould crawls up the walls near the ceiling... Round the corner past Lyons to the boozier I was last in with Angelo and BB... I feel sentimental over Notting Hill, even Joe Lyons' unique miasma is getting a favourable review...

I get a bus to the Grove and as I pass the greasy spoon on the corner of Lancaster Road I see Henry, he yells across to me, something about Rooster so I go over to him. He walks towards me, though walk is never accurate when you speak of Henry, he cavorts, grimaces in a fair imitation of a performer in 'The Black and White Minstrel Show'. He Uncle Toms it up, skinning his teeth, jive talking. High giggling. He moves to silent music, an invisible audience. He is the exception that proves the rule and the whites all love him. His is the acceptable face of the immigrant. This is the guy they are thinking of when they say: "Some of my best friends are black you know." He's crazy but I'm not sure how crazy. He's also a grass. "Hear your good fren him was arrested." And he sort of sniggers. "Them have warrant for him in Jamaica you know, them remove him already." He makes like a plane taking off with his hands and laughs. "I haven't got any friends, me. Or none that you'd know anyway." I sweep past him into the café. I don't believe that Rooster has been sent back, I don't want to believe it. But I want to know the word on the street, I also want twenty fags and this is the place for both...

### **CAROUSING WITH THE ENEMY**

A youth comes in with full Ted regalia, shuffles his shoulders sideways, then lifts each one in turn. He does a turn and they all cheer. Looking good, Vince, they say and laugh when he tells them he's going to give the coons what for tonight. He relates how he chased a couple of them last night. "Yeah, we'll get them out, those bastards." He looks round the admiring faces. "Nobody asked them to come down here did they? Dirty bastards," says a young boy. Auntie hushes them up, looking at me. "We got a mate of Frances staying a few days," she says brightly and Vince looks keenly at me. I feel queasy. I know the face, he's one of the geezers took the piss out of me and Berry on our way to the Mapleton one night and I am sure he must remember me. I smile at him but my heart's not in it. "All right, Vince," I say. Look him straight in the eye, not a glimmer. Expect we all look the same to him, us nigger lovers. Teds all look similar to me, but then they wear a kind of uniform for that purpose I guess. Don't often find myself this close to a Ted and now I look at the velvet collar and cuffs; he preens, does that thing where he grins at his public, head to one side then up straight, looks me in the eye: "You'll have to come out with us one night, darling." The family all grin, that's our boy, said without words. "Yeah, you never know your luck, Vince," I say. Auntie laughs... On the corner by the station, several Teds are preening and stretching like so many deformed swans. Vince is among them, he separates himself from the rest, pushing himself away from the wall until he stands in front of me. "Changed yer mind have yer, gal? Going to come out with me are yer?" He puts his fag out and flicks it past me with his thumb to the kerb. "In a hurry, in't she? Got to meet our Frances hasn't she?" Tel ushers me into the station. He's gone before I can say goodbye, leaving the case beside me...