

Fried Food made Flesh

I caught an early flight recently and therefore stayed overnight at the airport hotel. Catching the lift to leave in the morning, the doors opened to reveal two beached human whales within. They gave the lie to the lift's warning notice that it could fit eight people. That might have been true some years ago, but not now.

The beached whales were already in holiday costume, dressed for the beach though it was a grey dawn and the temperature outside was less than 40 degrees Fahrenheit and one inspired aircraft fuel rather than sea air. Obviously the beached whales were about to catch their 'plane to the seaside at some appallingly overbuilt resort, and proposed to travel in it in the same kit. Across the male whale's T-shirt was emblazoned a single word, ENGLAND, a superfluous message if ever there were one.

What was truly appalling about these beached whales was that they were not bad people, far from it; they were pleasant, smiled and said 'Good morning,' even joking mildly about the lack of room in the lift thanks to them. They were the salt of the earth, but also fried food made flesh. If they had been louts their appearance would have troubled me less.

What their appearance signified to me was one of two things, or both: the complete collapse of self-respect, at least in the aspect of physical appearance, or a total lack of imagination as to the impression they made on others – or both.

What did they see when they looked in the glass, I wondered? Did they not notice the stretch of the fabric of their upper garment as it failed to meet their lower garment, revealing an expanse of whitish blubber? And did they not notice their pucker-fleshed thighs, their varicosed lower legs?

Their failure was not an individual one alone, but a mass phenomenon. On my flight there were several passengers dressed in this manner, though our destination was not a resort and was even colder than our place of departure. The weekend before, in Cheltenham, I watched the crowds shopping for clothes, with not a single person among them dressed smartly, let alone elegantly. Slum-dwellers in Kinshasa make a better effort, with more success, in turning themselves out well. As with much modern architecture, so with modern dress; no matter how much is spent on it, the result is shabby in short order. Future historians, if there are any, will puzzle over this.

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