



Edward Viesel

On the Road, Again and Again

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This short story is the sixth part of a “text album” (a collection of short and very short stories) called *Isolated*, which contains 19 parts. Neither the present short story nor the collection have been commercially published. Should you be interested in publishing the present story or the collection, please write to the email address above.

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(Year 16)

The first drag off the filterless cig hits the lungs with a smack. The hazy grey light of the hangover slowly fades at the edge of vision. He cups his hands against the patrolling teachers seeing the smoke.

The tough guys are all there already, Ray thinks.

The no-fun guys are pacing the schoolyard seriously discussing computers, nuclear power plants, and other stuff. A few girls are marching around, showing off the gear they selected carefully a couple of hours ago.

“Hey, man, you were smashed last night, jeeze!” Danny pulls on his cig, a strong three-day stubble on his face. He grins, the stretching of his mouth looking like it’s painful.

They all stand around, slacking.

Then Chris cuts through the haze of depression, going: “Is everyone ready for Mathematics. We’ve got old Boots for number one.” His laugh gets stuck in mid-lung.

The ozone around the pack of guys is tinged with smoke and stale alcohol fumes. Danny chews over the situation for a few moments.

Then he says: “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

“I know: let’s go for a ride. I got my car round the back,” the skimpy-haired, muscular Smith throws into the discussion.

“Where we going?” asks Danny.

“Let’s go get some beers at the store down by the river,” Chris says.

“Brilliant idea. We could do with a change of scenery,” Ray goes.

They look round, tired, and head off.

They pile into the squat and dingy yellow car Smith has procured from an uncle. The motor wheezes and kicks into action. Both rear shock absorbers are busted. The exhaust silencer sounds like someone has taken a shotgun to it.

“What the hell is this mess?”

Chris, the neat guy in the red shoes and the stylish jacket, is staring at the pile of stuff dumped behind the driver’s seat: torn and shabby schoolbooks; loose and creased, scribbled-on pieces of paper; a flimsy manuscript book; an old, blunt pencil; and a bottle of cream liqueur crowning the motley show behind the driver’s seat.

“My school satchel,” Smith says.

He kicks down the gas hard, and their transport shoots off in a cloud of dust.

An elderly arts teacher wearing a black beret and a dark jacket, just locking his shiny new limousine, shakes his fist at the freewheeling spirits, lamely.

“Asshole,” Smith says. “Yeah, I just grab some stuff in the morning. The very image of an A1 pupil, with all his books and things, ready for studying. Just possibly it’s always the wrong stuff.”

Smith steers the car down the four-lane street; he is now wearing sunglasses.

“Got to get some petrol. I’m down to the last drop,” he says.

The cloudy water in one of the footwells sloshes around, statically.

“What the hell,” Smith goes, “gimme that bottle!”

He downs a gulp of the sweet and sticky stuff.

“Tastes like shit. I lifted this at a lousy party on Saturday. Uptight idiots: trying to act cool and serve cocktails and stuff. They were just asking for it.”

The wreck is running smooth; then it suddenly jerks and jitters.

“Oh no, the juice.”

Smith pushes the pedal down to max. Their means of escape slows, then stops. They get out and shove the heavy machine onto the grass verge. Morning rush-hour traffic is hooting and swooshing past. Danny flashes them a middle finger. No one stops.

They ramble down the artery.

At the filling station, a few hundred metres down-road, Smith goes into the shop to hassle the attendant for a canister.

Danny raps out sharply: “Come on, babes: beer!”

The guys hand over some coins.

Then Danny comes back with a frosted-over six-pack. They pop the caps off the amber bottles with a cigarette lighter. They gulp down the first few shots, the glittering pearls of ice-cold water running down their young hands. Colourful chocolate-bar and motor-oil advertising posters lighten up the atmosphere of stained grey concrete and grimy fuel pumps and stacks of black tyres.

“That stupid Ollie forgot to give me back my book again,” Danny says.

“What’s that?” Ray goes.

“*The Drifters or The Children of Torremolinos*. Great book, I love it. About some hippie guys who don’t want to fight in the Vietnam War. So they beat it to a place on the Mediterranean, in Spain, called Torremolinos. It’s near Málaga. A few fall in love. You know, guitar-playing and making out on the beach and so on. They just live the free and easy life. Then they all end up taking drugs and going to Marrakesh, the usual 60s stuff. One of them overdoses out of the story: too much Heroin. Bad luck.”

“Shit way to end.” Chris shakes his head.

“Yeah, but maybe better than coming home in a plastic bag.” Danny looks into the middle distance for a time, saying nothing.

“But, I mean, you could, like, take it easy on the drugs,” Ray goes. “I mean, you’ve got away from it all; so: have some fun, enjoy the warm sunshine and the sea. And Morocco must be a great place to visit, the age-old culture, the bazaars, the relaxed coffee houses.... Why does it have to end like that?”

“Perhaps there is no escape without drugs,” Chris says.

“Well, that’s anyone’s guess. Come on, guys: next beer!” Danny grins broadly. And that settles it.

Old Smith has got hold of a canister and filled it. The Crew tramp back along the grass verge in single file. Danny brings up the rear of the procession, carrying the decimated six-pack.

They get the motor going and move off with the motor screeching.

“Okay, you know where we’re going, Smith, take us to our destiny ... our destination!” Chris shouts above the din of the motor.

“Yeah, right you are,” Smith snarls, and rides over a red light, fiddling with the ancient crackling car audio.

Suddenly Ray looks up, and then he sees her: a young woman in a perfect white swim-suit. Her figure is slim and graceful. Her arms and legs are tanned, a middling, flush milk-and-coffee colour, not brown not black. The palm branches behind her in the clear azure sky are an intense green, a wild, dark, dark green. She stands peacefully, still and serene, without fear nor haste. The sand at her feet is a sunlit, glistening yellow. The woman is holding an ice-cream cone, the colourful wrapper glinting with sparkling pearls of cool water. She smiles at them, invitingly.

In order to make it to the grimy liquor store, the Crew duck under the advertising board with the ice-cream woman.

“And what can I do for you today?”

“We’d like some beers,” Chris says.

The geezer looks smashed, smells of beer, vocal chords alco-tanned. He’s wearing a dirty undershirt and grubby trousers.

“Right you are. How many?”

“I’ll have two!” Chris eyes the others.

“I’ll have three ... no, maybe four,” Smith says.

Danny goes: “Me, five! No, six!”

“Maybe I’ll have, like, four,” Ray says slowly.

The geezer throws up his hands in despair and simply starts stacking beers on the counter, and some plastic bags.

“Just help yourselves, if you please, gentlemen. 1.10 each, straight from the fridge, nice and cool, that’s what you need in this weather ... straight from the

fridge, sirs. And it's got that nice side effect." Then he grins cheekily at them, like he's jus' doin' alright.

The Crew stare back blankly at him and start loading up fast.

A small group, plastic bags with beer bottles in hands, dressed casually, but not grungy, moving off down to the river. They cut across the four-lane artery. They ramble down some steps: the river.... They group at a wooden bench. Two take up their position on the back of the bench. Two stand.

"Right, babes, here we go!" Danny flicks open his booze bottle with a lighter and a plop!

"Oh boy, this is better than Mathematics," someone says with a contented sigh.

Someone gurgles with some beer, spits it out on the path.

"Who's going to the X Club on Saturday?" Smith asks.

"I think maybe I'll go ... although it's not that great there. I mean, not much ever happens. People just get trashed and hop around, I mean, I...." Chris shuts up because he gulps down some beer. "They played loads of Fleetwood Mac last time, though."

Danny brightens up on cue: "Yeah, big coke band, that. They had to cancel their world tour once when they all got busted and done for possession."

"That's heavy, man.... I think I'll go too. I mean, what else is there to do?" Ray shrugs his shoulders.

A container ship up from the sea, up from the bustling port, up from the gateway to the world, slips by, diesel engine churning, family limousine, geraniums, clothes line, and the teddy-fur lining on the steering chair before the big wheel, they all slip by. Then all that's to see is the back of it with the national flag flying proudly in the warm and glittering breeze.

Smith says to Danny: "Well, how about the Rubicon on Saturday? I know a guy on the door."

"Yeah, maybe. Anyone ever heard Shaydler going, 'Jesus, how I whammied that chick behind the Rubicon?'"

"Ah, please don't remind me."

"That *must* be the last great piece of European modernist fiction!"

"Anyone going to show up at Grant's place to watch the Formula One race tomorrow?"

"That *does* sound like the thing to do!"

"I may pay a visit to the Rubicon."

"I was thinking of patronising the X."

"If we could manage transport, the X Club might be my establishment of choice."

"Ah, that rings true, undoubtedly."

“Did I tell you about this...,” Smith grins and takes a deep breath.

“Okay, if everyone is about to go X-ing, I’m ready to fulfil my duty.”

“No, listen, guys,” Schmitz goes.

“Assuredly, brothers, where there is a will, there’s a way: the X it is!”

“Stop it, you idiots!” Smith is red in the face and leaning forwards.

“Listen guys, here’s a story that’s real, for once. Well, I was riding over to visit my girlfriend Enid last Thursday; you know she lives in this village ... oh, by the way, her sister is always giving me these looks, I’m sure I’m soon going to ... so I had got just very slightly trashed in Ye Olde Bell beforehand. Advancing on the village with just a teeny-weeny bit of too much speed and listening to this really great hymn on the radio at full amp, I missed the bend and shot onto this field with some crops on it. But I got out okay on full throttle. Anyway, I stopped off next morning, going home, to have a look. The whole fucking thing looked like it had been ploughed. I’d done all the work for those stupid farmers. I couldn’t believe it. And for no pay as well!”

“Fucking hell. What an adventure...,” Ray shakes his head.

One after the other, the empties crash into the bin.

One after the other, the hours crawl by.

Then Smith goes, “I’ll leave you my last one. Got to head off home. Got to fetch my parents from the airport. They’ve been on a package tour, in Spain—Málaga.”

“Hey, come on, softy, what’s the matter?” Danny looks at him, his face dark and serious.

But Smith just clears off.

“What an asshole!”

Another empty hits the bin.

Danny gets up: “I gotta head off too. My dad’s stopping by my mum’s. First time in three months. Got to sober up a bit before. See you perhaps this evening.”

Ray and Chris drink on. Standing in the bright sunlight, their shadows are spread out in front of them on the towpath—long, dusty, and lifeless.

Up in the skies, a hot-air balloon is floating in the azure ether, and on its green body is branded the name of the Big Beer mark.

Ray relates to Chris: “Have you seen the commercial where after an opera this beautiful, stunningly dressed woman catches the eye of this handsome man in a dinner jacket. Then he vanishes, and she stands alone, kinda puzzled—and, well, alone. Then, suddenly, two beers appear next to her on the bar table where she’s standing: they’re, no, ... he’s back. That smile of hers ... oh, baby. And, I mean, I think Big Beer tastes quite good, what d’ya think?”

“Yeah, maybe. Idiots,” Chris tosses off a big gulp.

Ray looks towards the deep river.

“What we gonna do with the rest of the day?” he asks.

Another empty crashes into the bin.

A stout old-age-pensioner woman wearing a smock cycles past, her massive behind swaying from side to side on the comfy leather saddle of her gleaming machine—her shadowy shape receding fast into the river’s tableau.

“Hey, you, get lost!” Ray shouts after her. Runs a few steps. Comes back, a tear twinkling in his eye.

Another empty thunders into the bin.

Ray goes: “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Let’s trek up to that village where that rock music joint is, you know, Barney’s Beanery; the one that Jim from senior class is always talking about; where their crew went sometime. We’ve never been there. Let’s beat it there and just party.”

Ray is burning and ready to go.

“But how we gonna get there?”

“Hitch a lift, easy. We’re freewheeling, that’s what we are, so we’re gonna make it.”

A final empty bursts in the bin, splinters tinkling melodiously.

Heat is wobbling all around them, making the whole body sweat. They’re stationed at the side of the out-of-town road. They stick their thumbs into the hot rush of the sparkling machine units. Ray goes first, then Chris, then Ray, then Chris again.

A well-groomed luxury car with tinted windows stops: “Where you off to, guys?”

A non-descript face that goes with the sharp business suit, easy-listening radio channel playing in the off.

Chris points and talks.

“Well, I can take you along until the main road turns off, away from the river. I’m going in a different direction,” the voice in the car says.

“That’s great, we know our way around. We’re sure to get to where we want to go,” Chris says.

“Hop in.”

And they hop in.

The sun is refracted by the billions and billions and billions of drops of water in the river below. The green vineyards slip by, stationary. An old fisherman sits smoking a pipe on a rock next to the river.

“How much power this machine got?” Chris asks loudly, speaking above the noise of the car.

“It’s got the extremely powerful nine-six-five unit. I travel a lot, so I need the security of a big machine—for overtaking, you know. I work for an international computer company, Woodstock Corporation. It’s tough, boys! You know.” He lights

a cigarette. “You know, sometimes I say to my wife when I leave the house in the morning: ‘You can never be sure I’ll be back home alive this evening.’ That’s the kind of job it is! I have to travel fast, you understand. When I’m on the road, time is of the essence. It’s a hard job, a man’s job. Only last year I had to bury my friend Glaston.”

He waves his cigarette around and nearly burns Chris, who is sitting next to him.

“You know, when I kiss my beloved wife goodbye in the morning, I sometimes feel kinda sad. That’s the thing.... But anyway, there’s good things too. I’m going over to China again soon, to Wing Chun—that means ‘the White Isle’. I’ll tell you something, boys: if you’ve got money to burn, there’s chicks over there you can get—they’re pure magic. Not like ours here. That’s a lesson to learn, boys: first you get the money, then you get the women. That’s the way the world works. There’s some on the other side of the world, oh boy, I could tell you about.... You need a good education, of course, and you got to be tough, and you got to work hard. Then you’ll go places in the world. You’ll go places....” The suit stabs out his half-smoked cigarette in the tray.

The two young faces don’t say nothin’.

A warm swoosh of sour exhaust and air hits them as the car accelerates up the motorway feeder, out of sight.

“Well, that was an exclusive ride,” Chris gasps.

“How we gonna get away from this place? Where we going?” Ray looks helpless.

“Don’t know.” Chris looks around. “Come on, let’s sit down at that camping place over there and think things through, make a battle plan.”

It’s the usual affair: plastic chairs, ice-cream ads, low wooden fences round the trailers, geraniums, rubber dinghies, deck chairs with towels on, gas bottles, cars with double side-mirrors; bottles of suncream and soft drinks standing around on white plastic camping tables; it’s a quiet, family affair. They move on through to the bar, which is fitted out in orange and brown. The lonesome barman is poring over a glossy magazine.

“Two beers!”

They clink bottles and drink hastily.

“Someone’s sure to pick us up. It’s easier now we’ve left town, it’s different out here in the countryside. You don’t have to hustle like in the city.”

They eye the colour picture postcards tacked to the wall behind the bar. A whole vista of exotic, warm and sunny spots opens up before them, along with pictures of jet planes just taking off.

“Oh yeah, if we could only be in the Caribbean now, or Ibiza, or just Greece. Lazing on the beach, sipping ice-cool drinks, naked women, exciting music. Just the whole good life.”

Chris takes a gulp.

“Well, at least summer is not the slightest bit done. Let’s forget the struggle to get here. Let’s just pretend complete *amnesia*, okay?”

The beach-postcard girl with the bare breasts smiles at them and winks, in a sexy and conspirational manner. Someone has written “To my bonny M.” on it with black felt pen.

“If we’d all stayed together, at least it would have been more fun,” Ray says.

“But if we’d brought along the rest, it would also have been more difficult; I’m glad we split. It’d be the four of us hitting the floor now in this fake paradise: much more difficult to get ahead. In a way, we’re lucky.”

The barman comes over, he hasn’t got much to do.

“What’ya doing out here, dudes?”

“We’re on a day out,” Chris goes. “Going to visit a place we know.”

“Sounds good. You got to have some fun sometime. What else is there to life?” He laughs slightly obsessively, fiddling with the big collar of his mint-green shirt.

They finish their beers with a final gulp and make for the exit.

The sun is burning into the black-top. They’re standing near a bus stop, waiting for a lift. A car goes by, and then another one swooshes past, and then another. A trashy sports coupé drives by. Chris turns and sticks out his middle finger, takes a few steps and shouts: “You silly fucker.”

The car squeals to a full stop. Backs up fast.

“Got any problems, guys?” the driver purrs through the open window.

“Err, not really.... We’re looking for a lift,” Chris goes politely.

“Okay. I thought maybe something else. Jump in, guys.”

The rear-view mirror to which his cigarette smoke curls up is loaded down with fluffy toys stirring in the breeze from the open window and the heavy music crashing out of the rear speakers booming on the torn seats. He looks back, pulls out, his long hair making a swishing sound on his black leather biker jacket with metal studs. They shoot down some serpentines the tyres squealing the music kicking the driver now wearing mirrored sunglasses the singer squealing in a high-pitched voice.

Ray and Chris look straight ahead.

Then they pull up in a village.

“Okay, got to turn off here. Bang that door shut hard, will you; it don’t work properly anymore. Keep on rocking, guys.”

And the car shoots off aggressively with tyres squealing.

“Wow, he must’ve been loaded. Did you see how he drove.”

“Yeah, it seems we’re really going to meet all the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse on our trip; it’s crazy.”

Chris is in the lead. They’re working their way up a single-track road towards the centre of the village. To the right and left are bits of lawn, then come beddings with bright flowers and straggly shrubs, followed by the sturdy fences of private gardens.

Grocery stores, tanning salons, a bank, an insurance agency and a clothes shop are strung along the main street, invitingly. From a bruised and filthy bus stop, torn posters hang in shreds. An old woman is walking down the street in a work coat with pastel flowers printed on, carrying a shopping bag full of groceries.

Chris stops her: “Hello, we’re looking for Barney’s Beanery!”

She smiles, knowingly: “Oh, you mean the bar with the loud music and the drunks. Just keep on following this street. But why would anyone want to go there?”

“We just want to hang out and be cool, ma’am, that’s all. Well, thanks a lot; fare thee well.”

The old woman tries to say something and makes a gesture with her right hand, but the two travellers have already turned away from her and are striding along the street towards their destination.

Now they’re standing on the street corner, looking across the road at a long building with dusty panorama windows to which hemp leaves have been stuck from the inside. The sticking of poster upon poster in the entrance area has created a thick wad.

“That doesn’t look good,” Chris says.

“It don’ look good at all,” Ray goes.

They cross the road to the other side. Looking through the large dark window pane, their images are reflected back on them. Everything is dusty and cobwebbed.

“I don’t think there’s anything we can tune into here,” Chris says.

They walk up the short stairway to the doors.

A handwritten sign has been stuck to the door: “Closed for a short break. We’ll be back!”

“Looks like the break was longer than anticipated,” Ray says.

“Everything’s totally covered in dust! What a flop!” Chris says.

“Come on, let’s just drop our crazy idea, let’s get out of here,” Rays says.

They walk back down the stairway and turn to walk along the road in the opposite direction from which they have come.

A window opens in the house next to the bar, and a man with a lined face and grey hair pushes a cushion onto the window frame and then places his forearms on it.

“You looking to patronize that place? Forget it, they’re gone. They left some time ago, those reckless idiots.”

“What, they’ve completely shut shop?” Ray is thunderstruck.

“Yeah, they called it a day. About time, too. All that noise and the crazy people. Everyone was fed up: every day brought something new; we were quite exhausted in the end. Everything’s back to the way it was, now. Thank God!”

There is a moment of silence.

Then Ray draws himself up to his full height.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, are you on holiday, or something?”

“Sort of. We’re just taking time off.”

“Well, everyone needs a little fun sometimes. Right you are.”

Ray and Chris wave goodbye to the old-aged man, and get going.

The heat is still raving. They are flushed, wobbling up the street leading out of the village.

Then they are out among the fields and the open highway. Brain-grilling sunrays pour down to nestle snugly in between the slate fragments of the vineyards they pass and among the nodding green leaves of the vines, the steep valley stretching away—prehistoric miles of it, wonderful bedding, ancient earth.

“We need more,” Ray goes, “much, much more.”

The heap of coins they manage to put together is so miserable they have to sit down. Ray takes his shoes and socks off. He starts to wander off down the road.

“Hey, look at me! I’m free and easy. This is great!”, he shouts.

Chris gets going too, catches up, laughing. Slaps Ray on the back. Ray dances along the road, pulling silly faces.

“Look, there’s one of those winemakers who sell wine! We’re on the right track.”

He hops and dances towards the place, whirling his shoes above his head.

Then suddenly he falls to the ground, shouts “oh my God”, is holding his right foot with both hands. Chris reaches him: “What’s the matter?”

Ray holds up a bloody hand: “Look, a piece of broken glass, on the road.”

“Come on, maybe that winemaker can give us first aid.”

Blood has fallen on their path in small purple and crimson drops. Ray shakes his head at the stains.

“Oh, what a load of nonsense. We’re completely lost! Oh, man, just leave me lying here. I’ve had enough.”

He shakes his head again slowly. Then he gets up and hobbles after Chris.

“Here, that should stop the bleeding.”

The woman in the head scarf and rough trousers hands Ray some bandage. He winds it round and round his foot, and checks whether blood is still seeping through. Then he puts his shoes back on.

“And you wanted a bottle of wine, are you sure?”

The woman smiles friendlyly at them.

Chris hands over the pile of small change.

“D’you think you could open it right away,” he asks and smiles at the woman, rakishly.

“I can see you’ve been having a good time.”

She laughs and pulls the cork.

Ray downs the last swig from the bottle and lobs it against a traffic sign. The green fragments spin and sparkle in the sun. Ray boots a few into the ditch.

Chris is sitting on the curb. “Right, it’s your turn. We’ve got to get lucky sometime.”

A car stops: it’s a spruced up, modernised and perfected version of an old Volkswagen minibus. All the dashboard surfaces are made of factory-fresh, gleaming non-stick plastic.

“You heading down to town?” Chris asks.

“Hop in.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, yoh, here we go!” the driver says and puts on a pair of sunglasses while putting his foot on the gas. Then he fiddles around with the sound system, and then says casually:

“Man, guys, you don’t look like you’ve just come off the day shift.”

“We’ve been out of circuit for a day, getting away from it all,” Ray says.

“Lucky guys! Oh, man, some get it all.”

The driver shakes his head as the electronic beats from the audio kick in.

“Something seems to be going on around here,” he shouts. “There have been waves of hitchhikers this week. You’re the third party I’ve picked up. If you’ve got any information, let me have it, brothers.” The driver looks at them through his sunglasses, his wavy black hair nodding to the beat, its strands swishing to and fro on his dark brown cheeks.

“We wouldn’t know about anything. We’re just travellers,” Ray says.

“Okay, that’s fine with me. Love and peace to all, that’s my motto.”

Grey warehouses flash by as the travellers' driving machine with its pearlescent bodywork raves along the highway. And then their beefed-up package zooms down the track into town.

"How did it go?"

Chris looks at Ray.

The regular hang-out is filled not too badly, for weekdays. The lights are turned low.

"Crashed out straight when I came home. I really felt washed-out."

"Never mind. We had a great day out." Chris sips some beer.

"Mmh," Ray goes. "Sometimes I have a feeling it's more like a dream. Did we ever really sit around beside the river, talking about what really mattered, with all the time on our hands?"

"It's difficult to say," Chris says. "What is it that really matters?"

They have a couple more beers. The bar audio sings of love and freedom and, as time goes by, the groups of friends at the bar fall silent in the soft-tone vision, staring into space.

Then the two wanderers get going for home.

Chris has rode in in his parents' car. He flashes his lights, turns the corner. Ray waves. Then he sticks his hands in his pockets, hunches his shoulders and keeps on going.

Suddenly Ray looks up and stops: A woman is standing in a warmly-lit kitchen wearing a white apron. She is holding a cooking spoon with some spaghetti with tomato sauce snaking away from the round wooden spoon. Everything is so warm and bright and glowing in the cosy kitchen. The woman is beckoning, holding out the gorgeous-looking food to him with an enticing smile.

"Get lost!" Ray whispers at the board with the food advertisement.

Only the hazy, pale street lighting, riding high above him, and the motherly image hear him.

The Crew is gathered at their usual patch in the schoolyard, eyes pinched and bloodshot, faces drawn.

"I heard you went on a little tour. How did things go?" Danny asks.

"Oh, just about okay. We went looking for something, up the valley," Chris goes.

A short silence falls like soft rain on humankind's first morning. Then they all stand looking out across the schoolyard.

Then Ray goes: "We've got old Barnacles for Chemistry after the break. Anyone very keen on going?"