

I don't need to be at the airport to meet the others till 4pm. What I'll do till then, I tell myself, remembering I'm on holiday, doesn't need to be much. I know that will be difficult. It takes time to unwind and get into holiday mode, doesn't it? I get bored easily. Plus I'd developed a good routine in Canada—waking up early every day, writing for several hours, studying a little Spanish, and taking some exercise, (oh, and doing the sales job I'm paid to do, of course). I didn't want to let it slip. But before I need to worry about how I'll pass the time, there's my hunger to satisfy.

I find a small cafe in the maze of back streets with only Mexicans in it (a good sign), and order Huevos Rancheros and, what the hell, a coffee. About 9% of the population develop dependancy on coffee: about the same amount that develop a dependancy on "marihuana". I wasn't one of them. I like to still feel a kick from the caffeine that only *occasional* consumption ensures. A kick in the ass, both in terms of perking you up and pushing it out ("Really?" my mother said, most surprised one time, when I told her coffee sets the bowels in motion). Anyway, here I am drinking it for the second day in a row. How wild of me.

As I wait for my food to arrive, a middle-aged couple enters. The man is the spitting image of Harrison Ford and American or Canadian by his accent. I notice when they order they haven't even bothered to learn the Spanish for "please" or "thank you". Probably American, then.

Returning to my hotel, I notice a van parked opposite with 'Gordo Lele, Tacos, Tartos. Cabo San Lucas' on the side in plump black lettering. I wonder if that's the name of the Sinatra-impersonator I'd seen the night before. Despite being happily sated, the idea-seed for lunch is sown.

It's only about 10am, but on a bright, cloudless December day, Cabo feels pretty toasty. I seat myself in the shaded courtyard and open my Spanish book, pencil and pocket-dictionary close at hand. I would write a little too had I brought my laptop. *Damn it*—like with my phone, I hadn't wanted to have to worry about it. I hadn't realised that the part of Mexico I was coming to was pretty tame, pretty Americanised, compared with other parts. Cabo is on a peninsular south of California. It's not like the badlands on the US border caught up in that awful 'war on drugs'. Perhaps that's where my father was thinking of when he'd pleaded with me *not* to go to Mexico.

(Statistically, many American cities are far more dangerous than most Mexican ones, a point I'd used in my defence).

Ten minutes into my reading, a mere page consumed and plastered with translations, a man sits down in one of the free chairs, eyes my book and gives me an odd look.

"Each to their own..." he mutters, with pursed-brow befuddlement and the glint of a smile.

The cover of my book is a cartoon illustration of a girl dressed in a makeshift superhero costume surrounded by the debris of a rubbish and various characters in the story; clearly a book for young children. I point out that I'm learning Spanish, albeit with lumbering incompetence, but strangely this doesn't seem to placate him. A second or two later, however, and like the sun creeping from behind a particularly puffy stratus, a grin breaks through, indicating a little teasing on his part.

Part of me is annoyed at this disturbance to my study time, but another voice is reminding me that "*This is life—the very best of it*"; advocating that I "*Be present and welcome what arises*"; not resist but "*Go with the flow*", and finally, that I "*Stay open, share, and communicate*". Yes, it says all those things. And so, I lower my book with a genuine, albeit slightly harried desire to engage.

"So, what brings you to these parts?" I ask.

"I'm a doctor. Paediatrics,"—*something to do with feet, isn't it? Or women's parts...?*

"Do you come here often?" I ask, intending irony.

"Sure, I've been here many times. This is just a short trip. Left the wife and children back in Michigan."

"You're here alone?" I ask, a little surprised. Then I remember my father used to go off skiing once a year, leaving my mother, my brothers and I at home. I don't think my mother ever got to have her own holiday. I wonder if this chap's wife did or not.

"Sure," he replies. "Not to just lounge on the beach all day, though. Yesterday I went dirt-track motorbiking through the desert." This sparks my interest. I used to love motorbikes as a child.

"You'll grow out of it," I remember my father saying from the front of a car. Just once, but once was enough. I'd probably just pointed out the hundredth motorbike I'd seen. A *Kawasaki Ninja*, no doubt (a favourite back then). Or perhaps it was a pack of Hell's Angels tearing by. For a long time, I couldn't fathom what a Hell's Angel was. Some mythical creature? Thieves, bandits and murders? Whatever they were, what excitement their growling, gleaming machines would generate. But I grew out of it.

“*Baja Dirt*. That’s the name of the company should you want to have a go yourself.” He pushes his glasses up his nose a fraction, rectangular framed ones: just the type for a doctor. “And the day before that I went fishing.”

Fishing? This last word is like a child with a pin to an inflatable mattress: interest pops and whistles out of me. “Golf” would have had an equal effect. I smile and nod.

“My job’s taken me all around the world,” he continues. “Most recently to Africa.”

Big place, that. When he isn’t more specific, I ask, “Whereabouts?”

“Ghana.”

“How was it?”

“Well...” he begins, then pauses (only briefly—an American isn’t at a loss for words long), “simply wonderful. Very different, mind you.”

“How do you mean?”

“Oh, the toilets, the diseases, the... voodoo.”

My eyebrows lift a smidgen. *Sounds like you have some stories to tell.* I almost voice the thought, but remember my ‘routine’—the study time I want to get in—, and bite my tongue. I was also concerned that once I got him going, he might not stop.

He asks a little about me and I tell him... little. I don’t like to talk about myself (unless it’s in some giant memoir, obviously)—it always seems such an energetic expense. And it’s a sensitive topic when one is unsure of oneself. A private one. Do I struggle with openness and sharing? Sounds like it.

Words *are* coming out my mouth, though. I don’t want to appear rude. I’m trying to describe *who I am* and *what I do*, but the words are fragile and made-up sounding. He’s attentive. He’s smiling. But I feel a fraud. Either that means I’m horribly unsure of myself, or have too much false modesty. Place me in an interview situation and it’s another story entirely: I’m happy to sell myself there. That guy is sharp, confident and self-assured (the self that’s helped me survive all this time? the sales guy?). But if it isn’t an interview, please don’t ask me about myself. I hate that (almost as much as hearing someone who clearly loves talking about themselves). That is, until I started saying *I write*. And when did that happen? Why, that week in Calgary, of course. Just after I discovered Mark Twain’s real name. And this is what this is about I guess—this verbiage your eyes are grazing on (no indigestion, I hope); it’s all just to improve my self-image; so that when someone asks me what I do, I can say *I write* and not feel a fraud. So thank you for indulging me. Anyway, on with the story.

I'm wondering how many more questions I should ask before telling him I need to get back to studying. Though dirt track motorbiking had sustained it momentarily, sincere attention is waning fast and under no circumstance do I want to stray into that deadening realm of small talk and feigned interest. Have I asked a sufficient number of questions to show my genuine interest, but not so many as to give him the green light to sit there and chat all morning? Have I given as much as I've gained? Or, should one give without thought of gain. That's real generosity, right?

Only if you want to leave yourself open to abuse, a voice pipes in, adding, *Or be taken advantage of*. A weaselly voice.

Fear not! another voice counters. Stentorious. It swoops down from a bright and hopeful sky, wise and aquiline and grabs the rapscallious Weasel with its talons, whilst proclaiming, "You're part of an infinite Universe," letting out a piercing shrill, then adding, "At your core, a forever replenishing source..."

Have I done my duty to this stranger? I wonder. *Left my comfort bubble of self-indulgence long enough to spot a fellow player upon the stage. Have I served the moment well?*

"Time's up," I curtly inform him. No, I don't do that, I don't need to: he excuses himself at just the right moment. Perhaps he'd had his fill of whatever energy I'd unwittingly given (the dastardly, vampirous extrovert he was). Or, felt he'd given, but not received.

Perhaps he thought neither of these things, because unlike me, he isn't continually swinging from the threads of a hopelessly tangled Cat's Cradle of internal jibber-jabber. Perhaps he *enjoyed* our exchange (alas, so far down my list of possibilities) but being socially erudite, knew the time to bow out. I'm sure he'd noticed I hadn't put my book down; that it's still held in my slightly lowered right hand, poised, like an Obi Wan Kenobi to the handbrake of his hovering Landspeeder at a set of traffic lights, looking at the rapidly approaching Storm Troopers in his rear-view mirror, but not wanting to flout the highway code.

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An hour later I get up to fill my water bottle, empty after my mini-triathlon of human interaction, study and day-dreaming, only to find the water barrel needs replacing. After walking to reception to alert the hotel manager lady, I enquire as to the time.

“Twenty of one,” she tells me.

I’m not entirely sure what she means by this. I want to ask for clarification but, well, I feel uneasy in her presence and don’t dare quite frankly. She’s polite and smiles and all that, but she’s not warm. Under the pleasant glaze, I’m convinced there’s a bitch of a woman waiting to whip me with her tetchy, lacertilian tongue. I may, of course, be quite wrong about this: projecting my unconscious fear of the feminine onto this poor, kindly lady—but I doubt it. There’s a menace there.

And deeper still, a true angel of a person...

I’m unsure if it’s that wise, aquiline voice being serious, or the weaselly one being ironic. These voices were kind of new. They’d taken the place of the ‘mother voice’ I’d banished in Yellow Door in Calgary.

I imagine another piercing shrill, a bird circling high above; eyes fixed upon me. Why inner reason and wisdom had taken the form of an eagle, I’ve no idea. But I roll with it.

So she’s an angel, hey... hmm...

Unclear how I can apply such a hippy dippy theory in reality (*dislike* and *judgement* being so much easier to deploy than *understanding* and *compassion*), I wave the aquiline wisdom away.

I’m acutely aware she thinks I’m annoying and no doubt my resultant efforts not to appear so, including my prim only-if-it’s-no-bother type tone, only acts to reinforce that perception. Hence I don’t ask her to clarify what she meant by “twenty of one”. Whatever the time, it’s time for lunch; or another distraction, at least: it seemed that morning I couldn’t concentrate for more than twenty minutes without getting up to get more water, do some stretches, sunbathe, or ask miss ice queen another question.

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Gordo Lele’s little taco restaurant, I discover, is a treasure trove of *Beetles* memorabilia. Faded posters tacked up with brittle, jaundiced Selotape®, clocks, watches, ties, flags, mugs, tea pots and the like. There’s a few non-coleopteran-themed objects here and there, like various US state/

province car number plates, signed NFL or Ice Hockey shirts, and lots of happy customers photographed hugging, kissing, or stood grinning next to their host.

I'm the only customer. Señor Lele is sitting watching an NFL game playing on an old telly by the entrance. His sidekick, a chap who reminded me of Manuel from Fault Towers, is in the back preparing the 'day's special' I'd ordered: fish tacos.

He's a rich man, I think, observing Señor Lele from my back corner of the restaurant to his. His arms rest folded on a generous paunch, their rise and fall revealing a steady breath tamed by time. Resting on his stout nose; a pair of thick glasses; below it, a neat little moustache. He's wearing a black tux, white shirt and red bow tie, but only where his 'comedy' apron covers his blue long-sleeved shirt and grey baggy trousers. His shoes are cream-coloured, leather I assume, thick stitching circumnavigating each. His mouth is slightly ajar. I trust he's kindly waiting to catch the fly that would otherwise find itself twitching in the fish tacos I'd ordered. The hairnet he dons gives me hope.

On the wall beside him is the *With the Beatles* album cover: the black and white one where the band members faces are half-obscured in shadow. This one had been edited to include a fifth face, however: Gordo's—a much younger face, I notice. A gift from a happy customer for sure. I wonder how long he'd had the restaurant. How many days, weeks, years he'd spent sitting in that chair. Or singing the same Sinatra song. A simple life. A rich life.

Nothing had broken his fixed concentration of the NFL game—a game of fits and starts, the appeal of which confounds me—nothing that is, till my asking him the time, in Spanish, from across the room (a cosy den of a restaurant with nine small tables).

He takes off his glasses and places them on the table. He then fiddles with a cord around his neck till he manages to hook it with one plump finger and lift it over his head, the cord brushing his hairnet half-off in the process. A mobile phone appears, dangling mid-air, spinning.

He clasps it with his free hand, puts his glasses back on with the other, presses a few buttons, then squints, fiddles with his glasses again, presses the phone a few more times, and... yes, by this point I'm feeling a little guilty for asking for the time. And oddly, sorry for the phone, which is obviously a little lethargic and uncooperative after being dragged half-asleep from its secret, chest-hair lair, thrust on the worst of all theme park rides, then prodded mercilessly.

“The time is 1:25pm,” he finally says, in perfect English. *Ah, so hotel lady meant 1:20pm...* He places the groggy device on the table and gets back to watching the game. A minute later, Manuel appears with my food. He also has a moustache, though his is bushy and unkempt compared to Lele’s adroit and dapper adjunct (as Taco chef hierarchy dictate, no doubt). His off-white apron had clearly undergone a lot of hand wipes—it looks more like the centre of a butchers chopping board. I look at my food, and frown. Not at the three petit, mouth-watering tacos that look and smell fantastic. No; at what they’re sitting on. A plate, yes. But a plate encased in a plastic bag. *WTF?!* Still, it’s better than the cadaveric spasms of an insect. I wonder if it’s some novel way to ‘take away’ what you can’t eat: literally turn your plate inside out and walk away with a doggy bag. I take my first mouthful, juices dripping—no, cascading!—onto the plate, and consider asking for another plastic bag for a makeshift bib.

No, it can’t be a doggy bag—the food’s too delicious for any chance of leftovers. The plethora of appreciative smiles that adorned the walls make plenty sense now. That leaves only one logical explanation: they can’t be arsed to wash up. *Really?!*

When two girls enter and sit at the table in the corner opposite me, the completion of a square—myself, Gordo and the TV at the other three corners—forces me to smile wide, some unseen anxiety leaving me. Our host gets up and waddles over to them. His now wonky hairnet (cue flash of guilt) looks like he’s modelling a new line of jelly fish berets.

A minute and several shuffles later and Gordo’s back watching the game, no doubt keen not to miss any of the action. I think it unlikely: not only do NFL players appear to stand round ‘strategising’ most the time, but there’s numerous repeats and analysis if something significant does happen—like someone managing to run more than a few meters with the ball (though, technically it’s not a ball, is it; not “foot-ball” either. More, rugby for wimps. But I wouldn’t say that to an NFL player. Nor an NFL supporter. Not in America, at least. Not with all those guns there).

Once I’d settled my bill with Manuel, I walk over to Gordo and complement him on the scrumdiddlyumptious food. He reacts like he’s heard it a million times, that is, he barely reacts at all. Or perhaps someone had just commenced running with the ‘ball’ and I’d just pulled him away from the immanent pile-on those boys seem to love.

“One question, though,” I say before leaving. One I simply *have* to ask. “Why the plastic bag on the plate?”

Gordo maintains his blank stare, though the furrows on his brow deepen a fraction, as if my words were fresh boreholes sunk into an already empty oilfield. But then he twigs, black gold gushing forth miraculously: “It’s easier, more fast, cleaner for me.”

“Oh. Ok,” I say jovially, and as if it makes total sense. But it doesn’t. *What a waste of plastic*, I think as I walk away, the environmentalist in me riled. *And not the most pleasant way to eat a meal*. But then I figure that after ten, or twenty, or however many years of owning a restaurant, one might get tired of washing up other people’s plates. And plastic sheath or not, the food was *deliciosa*. Gordo, *My friend, I’ll say it clear*, you’re forgiven, you did it yourrrrr way.

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Back at the hotel the first thing I do is ask the owner the time.

“Twenty of two,” she replies. I assume she means twenty *to* two. Why I’m asking the time so soon again, I’ve no idea. Nervous, I guess: don’t want to miss my ride to La Ventana now, do I. But it’s also sign of my mind being open to all sorts of possibilities; like somehow I’d stepped through an invisible wormhole on my short walk back to the hotel and unwittingly lost an hour of Earth time. We chat for a minute or two—about the weather, how long she’d had the hotel, life in Cabo—small talk. In-glorious small talk. Then, filled with chilli-taco-infused courage, I ask her, in a roundabout fashion, what she meant by “twenty of two”. Only I forget how she’d phrased it exactly. My short-term memory isn’t the best. I need to do more word searches and Sudukos. That helped my 90-year old grandmother stay sharp right up to her last day, when radical senility set in, just as my father learned from his treacherous ‘brother’ that his father wasn’t his real father, and his mother was in no state to tell him who was. Ouch. Anyway, in this case perhaps poor memory isn’t to blame. Perhaps subconsciously I’m just trying to rile her. I’m odd like that.

“Sorry,” I say, “again, how did you say the time just a minute ago? It’s just it’s different to how I’ve heard it said before, that’s all.”

She looks at me like I’m crazy, then says, “Twenty to two.”

“No, you said something else.”

“No, I didn’t,” she replies, curt as you like. *Oh dear, the beast stirs. This is getting confrontational. Must-gently-steer-this-back on track*.

“You said something like twenty and two... or twenty on two.”

“I would never have said that,” she says. *Oh shit.* Her inner harridan has begun scratching with claws at a thin veneer of fake pleasantries. You should never wake a beast from hibernation.

“Ok,” I say and pause. *This isn't going well: breathe...* I'd read a book on Non-Violent Communication (NVC) a month earlier. Could I remember any of it now? No. It's another one of those books that seems revelatory at the time but is as hard as hell to apply in real life and is soon forgotten (unless you've been under house arrest for 15 years, like Aung San Suu Kyi. She's big on NVC, apparently. It'll probably get her elected one of these days).

I take a discrete, deep breath, then say, “Just tell me the time again. As if I'm asking you now, ‘what is the time?’”

“I would have said twenty to two,” she repeats, her words falling about me like icicles breaking loose from the ceiling of some giant, icy cavern I'm in and showering me in tiny shards.

I can tell she really doesn't have time for this conversation, like one feels static in the air before thunder: I can see it in the deepening crevices of her sun baked brow, the eagerness of her fingers tips hovering over her laptop keyboard. But I don't give up. How can I? I'm in too deep.

“Hmm, that wasn't it,” I say, with my best puzzled face. I may even enact the caricature scratch of the head. *I really must be annoying*, I think, but plough on: “It was some other way of saying it I've not heard before.”

“I've no idea,” she says, almost spitting words. Certainly on the verge of getting her wand out and vanishing me in a puff of smoke. Then, past a brief lull that follows, the air almost crackling, the beast growling and icicles crashing all around me, she adds, “It could have been twenty of two.”

“Yes!” I say. *Hallelujah!* “That's it!” Relief akin to a doctor telling me I don't need a broken limb amputated after all washes over me.

“I haven't heard that way of saying it before, that's all,” I say. “Well, you learn something everyday, don't you.” *Gosh, I sound like a right prat.*

I thank her again with obsequious charm and scuttle away. As soon as my back is turned, a false, semi-molten smile peels from my face, hardens instantaneously and plummets Earthward like a steel cast. In some unseen dimension I think I even hear it clang as it hits the ground and I step over it. *Probably the most pointless two minutes she's spent in a while.*

No, I think we bonded. I think she likes me