

Insane in the Membrane

by Samuel Morgan

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Flight to Calgary

Calgary. That's where I'm headed. It's in Canada, in case you didn't know—a few friends didn't. Can't say I'm over the moon about it. Dreading it, in fact. I'm trying to keep an open mind, though; it's just a week, a recce of sorts, but in a month I'll be leaving London for good, and moving there. Won't I? Can't see myself changing my mind. It's either go, or quit my job. And quitting now at the time of 'financial crisis'? Wouldn't be wise, would it?

You've got to see yourself free, whilst you still can...

I don't know much about Calgary, but I know it isn't San Fran, or Rio or Barcelona, and I kind of just... *know*. Like in the movies when a doctor comes into the relatives' waiting room, hasn't yet said anything, but his face says it all, and those awaiting news burst into tears.

There's a choice to be made. Too much time's been wasted.

I'm stuffed up with a cold I can't seem to shake and have a nine-hour flight ahead of me. *Urrgh*, I hate flying. It always feels like such a trauma. Pressure differentials play havoc, not just on crisps packets that swell up and threaten to pop like a gun going off (terrorist hijacking in full swing), but on one's body. Well, *my* body, at least: skin clammy, eyes bloodshot, back aching. Sitting—sitting for *so* long. It really doesn't help if you have back issues exacerbated precisely by sitting. And deep-vein thrombosis: they've put the fear into you about that. I've no idea what it is, but I wriggle my legs and toes about now and then, just in case. I even get up, go to the back of the aircraft, and do some stretches. If exercise in the mile-high club doesn't appear to be on the cards (and in all honesty, in those poky little toilets, would you really want to?), why not do some half-assed mile-high yoga? Who knows who you might meet back there mid-downward dog.

Even before you're in the air, there's the stress of getting to the airport, invariably arriving ridiculously early or excruciatingly late. Then there's the palaver of 'security'. Luckily, they rarely ask you to take your shoes off these days but you still have to place all your liquids in a clear plastic bag. The bags they provide are actually quite handy—perfect for keeping Swiss Jarlsberg (a favourite) fresh in the fridge. I always pinch a few extra.

“No liquid containers over 100ml”—that's the rule, isn't it. If I did have some chemical bomb-making cocktail needed in volume, then I'd just carry several little bottles of it, wouldn't I, and decant them into a larger one on the plane.

It's all just to mess with your head, to give you the impression that the erosion of civil liberties and the billions spent on all this newfangled security equipment protects our freedom. Equipment like those full body scanners—I bet they aren't cheap. I dread to be ushered into a queue for one of them. X-ray machines, basically. How else could they see if you've got plastic explosives strapped to your genitals? I've only been in one once, and vowed never again (*it is optional, you know*). It really wasn't nice having to stand there with my arms up, hands behind my head, for what seemed like eternity, while they zapped me. I remember tilting my head to the side in a futile attempt to minimise the radiation entering my cranium through my jelly-filled eye sockets, only to curse the fact I'd just exposed my hollow ear canal to their ray gun. Don't pretend there's no health risk, Uncle Sam (for of course that's who has insisted on their proliferation). I'd rather have a strip search, and am quite prepared for that the next time I'm shepherded into a queue for one and flatly refuse. I just hope they use lube.

I begin taking decongestant tablets a day before flying, and spray 10-hour “extra-strength” decongestant up each nostril on boarding the aircraft. I know from experience that my ears still won't clear properly until several days after landing, but at least I won't have the searing pain and deluded panic that my eardrums (or entire head) might burst as we descend. Yeah, I'm pretty prepared this time, and I smile with gleeful smugger as I slip off my shoes and pull on a pair of ski socks. *If this isn't progress, Sam, I don't know what is; maybe I'm finally getting somewhere in life...* Ah yes, it's the small things. And I'll certainly need the extra pairs of socks because of the insanely cold air-conditioning on most planes. What's that all about? I usually hide under a couple of blankets for a good part of the journey—the one they kindly leave shrink-wrapped on the seat for

you, plus the one I bring with me (pinched from a previous flight where one blanket definitely wasn't enough, and "No sir, we don't have any spare").

My seat is the leftmost of a three-seat-wide middle row, and the central seat is free. Just before takeoff, the lady on my right gets up to claim a free row behind us, indicating to me, as she struggles to prise free her bottle of water from that Venus-fly-trap front seat pocket (you know the one), that I now had the luxury of a whole row to myself. I thank her and smile, for it was indeed a most exciting prospect to someone who hates flying and hates sitting.

I'd gotten up early to catch the 8:25am flight, and there seems to be a delay, so I deploy my eye mask and ear plugs and hunker down for a nap. We sit there at the gate for ages, the captain, no doubt, waiting for that elusive "available slot". It didn't matter, though, because I was sleepy and comfortably cocooned in muted darkness, and looking forward to claiming my mock First Class bed just after takeoff, when they turn off the seat belt sign. Or perhaps after they've fed us. Yes, falling to sleep with a full belly would do nicely. I had it all planned out.

I'm almost dozing off when I sense movement to my right. I apprehensively lift one corner of my eye mask to confirm my sinking suspicion: what had so agitated the air molecules about me was someone sitting in the ceded seat. That relinquished bounty gifted for my essential comfort by the kind lady—stolen! To make it worse, the invader is a whale of a woman. Why does that make it worse? Because I'm a fatist like my mother (blame her). I'm annoyed she's taken *my* seat, and I'm annoyed she's fat. She isn't metabolically or horizontally challenged, differently weighted, plus-sized, or any other politically correct term; she's fat. Wilfully and recklessly rotund. I lift myself out of my seat a touch with enviable ease, and pivot round to inspect the rows immediately behind, mentally cursing the fact I hadn't shifted to the middle seat to lay claim to my three-island territory. I scour all the rows, right to the back of the aircraft, and sure enough, there are several others she could have chosen. Rows where I bet the person sitting there wasn't planning to crash out and sleep like I was—they just don't look the type to me. They can probably sleep sitting up, or liked watching movies the entire flight.

I consider asking if she wouldn't mind moving to one such row, but can't bring myself to shift the burden to someone else, and instead sink back into my seat like the dregs of some fruit smoothie

sliding back down the inside of a liquidizer: splattered pulp that never made it to the glass and had only a cold rinse and plug hole to look forward to. But perhaps I need a rinse under a cold tap—I'm being an idiot. She has every right to sit there. *You win some and you lose some*, I tell myself. I'm cool with it. Till I'm annoyed again, and glower at her childishly. But she doesn't look. She hasn't and she won't. She knows she's just whipped my mock First Class bed right from under me. She knows.

On booking my flight, I'd had the option to order a 'vegetarian Asian'. It clearly isn't the in-flight entertainment I'd fantasised for an instant it might be, and certainly doesn't warm me that way. Trying to garner warmth by hovering my hands over the foil lid is like huddling over a camp fire made of match sticks on a cold night. In my haste to sample the plane's culinary delights, I burn my palate, leaving me with that annoying oral sensation that sullies gustatory delight for days. The measly portion of lentil curry sauce with rice (and hint of over-heated plastic) does, however, taste surprisingly nice.

Peering at the flight attendant from within my blanket burka, I ask why they insist on putting the air-con on so high. "To help circulate the air, Sir," she responds coolly (a tone I might have found rude, had it not been appropriate to subject matter) and plonking my dinner on the tray table.

Really? Are you trying to simulate an Arctic storm?!

Belly full, I scrooch down under my blankets and try to forget just how vulnerable we are up there at 39,000 feet. Not just to the bombardment of cosmic radiation, but something, *anything*, going wrong with the aircraft. I'm hoping this won't be the plane where a wing just falls off. They do seem to wobble an awful lot. Especially when turbulence hits, as it invariably does ("The Captain has switched on the fasten seat belt sign." Mine is already fastened, tight).

Has a wing ever fallen off? There's always a first. As an antidote to my anxious imaginings, I bring to mind how steady and graceful planes look from the ground as they paint pretty trails across the sky. That seems to do the trick.

I close my eyes and try to sleep. But who sleeps sitting up? Perhaps only those with a clear conscience. Or new parents still catching up on lost sleep, months or years later.

I did actually meet an interesting chap at the back of a plane once. There were no amorous manoeuvrings or sun salutations—just a friendly chat with a nice elderly gentleman called Paulo. He had a slight pot belly, bushy eye brows, and large ears (which, along with other cartilage-composed appendages, keep growing with age—did you know that? I didn't, but the mystery of why my father looks more and more like *The BFG* with age is solved). Paulo, his wife, daughter, and grandchildren were returning from a holiday in Paris. His name reminded me of Paulo Coelho, a favourite author of mine at the time (blame adolescent naivety). He gave me his card, and offered to host me in Rio when I got the chance.

I was a student at the time, on my way to Brazil to complete fieldwork for my dissertation. I was headed to a conservation centre in the Mata Atlantica—a rainforest older than its famous counterpart, the Amazon, and, before the Portuguese arrived in the 1500s, even more biodiverse (only 7% of the original 1.2 million square kilometres of forest remains).

I can still remember standing on a hill out there, all around me a barren, though grass-green, landscape seeming to stretch forever in every direction. It was like some maniacal giant had taken a hair trimmer to it in spasmodic fits—little clumps of remaining forest stood here and there, trees huddled together, cowering. I imagined how it used to sound—the roar of jaguars, clucks and whines of golden lion tamarins, whistles of golden-bellied capuchin monkeys, and croaks of Brazilian golden frogs (I'd done my research and there did seem to be an awful lot of golden-coloured animals—inhabitants of the fabled *El Dorado*, perhaps). Indigenous peoples had once resided there too, of course. I suspect they knew that the real gold was green. They were murdered, or enslaved, or died of disease, pretty much all one million of them.

A few months later, I took Paulo up on his offer. His house turned out to be quite a mansion, located in the lush hills above Rio. He had his own duck 'zoo', housing varieties from all around the world (it isn't always easy to import ducks, apparently—lots of bureaucracy), and his house was full of erotic paintings and sculptures (his wife's doing, he assured me), all wonderfully Brazilian, that is, unashamedly sensual. I ended up leaving the bulkiest of my belongings there while I ventured off to the Amazon for a few weeks, a place I'd wanted

to go to ever since I saw it on some BBC Nature program as a child, enchanted by the lush imagery and David Attenborough's silky narration.

Paulo and I remained in touch on and off for several years afterwards, but he may have passed away by now, for all I know. Life is odd like that. Anyway, knowing one's friends, acquaintances, or faux left-luggage clerks were strangers once should mean you've no qualms sparking up conversation with one at the back of a plane, on a bus, or wherever.

This time, it's not Brazil to which I'm heading, but Canada. The company I work for is American but it was impossible to get a US work visa—my role and profession wasn't deemed skilled or unique enough, and damn, didn't I know it. Their UK market has dried up, and Canada is the only other place they operate. My boss is from Calgary. He said business is booming there, and suggested I relocate. I'm kind of just going with the flow. Plus I'm aiming to push past the two-year mark in the same job.

[plane logo]

I can't sleep. On a plane *fully reclined* means *practically upright*. That round button in the armrest may look promising, but it's always such a letdown (oh, if only it was). I know this, yet always find myself prodding and pumping it—once extra hard for good measure—just to see if by some miracle, or fault, I can force another few degrees of recline. But I shouldn't really be wishing for faults on a plane. Redesign, perhaps, like having more space at the back for “aero-yoga”, or making all the seats like those in First Class. That should be the only way to fly long distance. Have you seen the funny oblong-shaped booths they get? All that private space, and chairs that actually become beds? You probably have, because you're made to, aren't you, as you enter the plane. Those First Class passengers sitting there already, radiating smugness, or trying not to. Waving fat wads of cash in your face, basically, as you file meekly past to your pen. You look for little points of differentiation between you and them, these rich, indulgent, pampered types. Something displeasing. Something to dislike. Just so you can imagine you're better off in Cattle Class after all. But more often than not, they look normal enough, if a little preened.

And what of those First Class seats that are still vacant—do you notice them, too? It's onto these I project the fantasy that perhaps, just perhaps, they're free, and no one would really notice if I just slipped into one. It's probably because I knew someone that used to try it, and succeeded, no less (pre-9/11). They'd hold back in the departure lounge till the last few passengers were filing through the gate, then follow, and sit down in the first available First Class seat they saw. I tried it once coming back from Delhi, but was stupid enough to do so on a flight that was practically empty. The plane was still rolling along the tarmac when the air hostess, who moments earlier had offered me a glass of champagne with a *Cristal* smile, asked if I was sitting in the correct seat. When I admitted it was unlikely to be the case and feigned surprise that this might be a problem, her composure cracked a little. I was allowed to sit there for takeoff, but given no more treats, and told I would have to move once the Fasten Seat Belt sign was unilluminated. So I watched the land depart and welcomed the clouds in luxury (albeit in a seat as horizontally frustrated as those in Standard Class; the potential was there, but cruelly denied) with my imminent embarrassment looming (well, at least an empty flight meant hardly any witnesses).

Back in cosy cattle-class, firmly strapped in, what do they only go and do? Draw the curtains between you and First Class firmly shut, that's what. There's even buttons along the edge of the curtains they pop into place. They literally don't want to breathe the same air as the rest of us. I don't blame them really; I always manage to pick up some bug on a flight. No matter what class you're flying, I don't think anyone can really avoid the carnival of germs circulating on what is basically a giant fart-tube.

I'm trying to be positive about the potential move to Calgary. The oddest of places can surprise you sometimes, can't they. I remembered going to Belgium once and being rather charmed by it.

Perhaps I'm in a good ship and can trust where the winds are blowing. Hell, maybe I'll even enjoy it. Why that seems such a remote possibility now, physically at the peak of my jet-propelled arc about the Earth, emotionally in a trough of despondence, I've no idea.

I'm a BMD. A Business Development Manager. Basically, a sales guy. Of course, I don't like to be defined as such, so let's say *I'm Dom, presently working in sales, aged 32*. Admittedly, "presently" has lasted six years to date. It was meant to be a short-term thing to pay off debts. In sales, you're only really as good as your last deal, so the pressure's always on. It can be a revolving door from

one project or company to the next. Unless you're good at it and don't get bored, that is. Most companies need good salespeople so I'll never be short of work, but it terrifies me to think I'll still be in this game when I'm forty. I've met a few salespersons around that age in various 'boiler rooms', looking rather haggard from dragging their ball and chain 'targets' and saying the same old crap day in day out. There's something more to life, right? It's never too late for a career change. Is it?

I notice someone taking pictures with an iPad through their cabin window. Normally it looks odd, people taking pictures with iPads. There's just something not ... right about it. But at this moment it serves me well, because it means from where I was sitting in the middle of the aircraft, I, too, could see the incredible white and jagged world below (with 'Retina display' clarity). I check on the in-flight map to see where we are. It's Greenland! And I have a clear, unimpeded... Seat-Thief Lady lifts a gelatinous arm to select something on her screen, and my view is purloined. Though her hand definitely rises to touch the display, the lower part of her arm doesn't appear to move. It stays connected to her torso, a mass of hanging blubber long since surrendered to gravity. While I wait, agog for my snowy peaks to return, I picture a walrus. Then a blue whale. Yes, a whale, rising to the surface with its mouth wide open as it scoops up millions of tiny krill-flavoured *Doritos* into its bulbous belly and... *I'm being an idiot, again. I'm being mean.* I sit back in my chair and pull down my eye mask.

I've had a pretty easy ride with my current employer. When the UK market collapsed, rather than sack me, they kept me on and sort of let me coast. I can't say I felt that secure for most of it; they gradually fired six other staff till there are just two of us. I guess I should be flattered I'm one of those left standing. I work from home (stepping into an office now gives me the heebie jeebies), the hours are flexible, and I have plenty of free time. Free time I fear I've largely wasted up to this point. I made a half-arsed effort to learn the piano (buying an expensive electric one, and barely using it), took some acting classes (but didn't risk any auditions), and started painting (and had more blank polythene-wrapped canvases than painted ones). I kidded myself I just needed some time to take it easy and process 'stuff' (What? Who knows? Imagined childhood trauma, perhaps).

But now I am determined not to waste any more time. The image of an hour-glass has literally begun to haunt me. Sometimes I wake from some day-dream where I was trapped in one, great

boulder-sized chunks of sand falling on my head. Other times they appear like the stampeding feet of elephants, and just squash me, multiple times. Happens more often than I care to admit to. Staying in this sales role needn't be forsaking a more creative and self-expressed existence, I tell myself, sliding a finger between my waist and the too-tight seatbelt. Ennui of job aside, I'll take evening classes. I'll find some creative hobby that sticks. Yes, I will. And I smile. A 39,000-foot-high smile. The possibilities (and fantasies?) are endless.

I still can't sleep. (I'd lie down, if only the seats next to me were free). I remember I copied the last season of *Breaking Bad* onto my laptop before I left London. I'm unsure how I'll console myself when the series is over, but I must keep going. There's only ten episodes to go. I often find myself watching two or three at a time, so I know the dreaded moment isn't far off. I locate the right file (tap tap), insert my headphones (a slight prick) and click 'play' (depress the syringe), disappearing into the strangely spectacular world of smack and crystal meth.

I don't mind working hard. If it's a passion, or something practical. I'd like build a house one day. Or keep an allotment. As a child, I spent countless hours making things in my father's garden and workshed: tree houses, death slides, trap doors, underground bases (hiding from my mother?). But when I ask myself what my passions are today, I kind of draw a blank. What dreams would I happily dedicate hour after hour to realise? I'm still working it out, I tell myself, then scold myself. Like "maybe," "sometime," and "I don't know," it's a lie that guards the safe and comfortable domain of playing small.

Perhaps I'm just lazy, I think, nibbling on a pretzel.

Yes, that's right, you are! No, you're lazy! And you're drifting through life.

There may be the occasional lull, but mostly my mind is like a python throwing endless coils. It sounds oddly like my mother's voice in there. Funny that.

I know what I *don't* want. I don't want to work long hours in a job I loathe, rushing home at the end of day to get on with 'living life' (watching TV?). I didn't want to be one of those people that sell their soul to the corporate ladder, saying they'll just do it a few years to save up some cash, and *then* go back to pursuing their dream (the acquired lifestyle, car, mortgage, and salary to match

invariably dissolving their initial ideals till they're but hazy memories dismissed as post-adolescent fantasy). I don't want to retire and wonder where my life has gone. I don't want any more regrets; I have enough already: real stinkers, like not asking Jessica Addlesworth for a kiss at the school disco when I was ten years old.

I used to think half the trouble was I never really had a "dream" (except when I was five: to be a train driver). Then I watched this graduation speech—one of those videos that do the rounds on Facebook—by some guy who said you don't need one (I can't remember what he said you *do* need, but at least I'd been given permission to drop the dream part). Now that was a relief. I was always waiting for clarity to strike like lightning, illumining my path (it's a similar story for 'the one' I've been holding out for—and yes, I'm chronically single). I should give up on all that now...

Yes, you should—get real, grow up! (My mother again?)

I could think about what interests me, what I enjoy, and pursue that.

Do that. Waste more time, why don't you.

Shh.

How privileged I am to be able to even think about dreams and desires, when so many people in the world are lacking and have little in the way of choice.

Yes, you spoilt brat...

They say it takes 10,000 hours to get really good at something... guess I had better get started.

It's too late already. You're old, Dom. You're old. You're a nobody.

Fuck. Why is my mind such a bitch sometimes?

Anyway, this what it's about—what your eyes are skimming right now: me believing it *isn't* too late. Because part of me, a big part, is aching to be more creatively expressed (and not just in how I arrange the dishes once I've washed up, or in the way I concoct my own pasta sauce, or doodle on scraps of paper.) I want to contribute somehow. I want to shine. I want to feel alive... and not feel

guilty for that. Feel truly alive. Yes, that's it. Perhaps I should prise open the emergency nearest four and proclaim it from the heavens, for all on Earth to hear...

No, dimwit, don't do that.

(See, sometimes the inner voice serves me. Sometimes. Just testing...)

The walrus is making her way through a whole tube of Pringles (almost as fast as I am scenes of *Breaking Bad*). *Don't you know how awful they are?* And now a Coke (*that too*). Oh, and let's not forget the ice cream and pretzels the cabin crew just gave out. What a combination! *You're obviously aware you're overweight, and I doubt you're happy about it. So why are you eating this crap? You do know that eating it is precisely why you're fat, right?! You do get that?* I've no sympathy.

But then I do. I'm being a pillock. Perhaps she was abused or something. Perhaps she hates herself and lacks confidence. I shouldn't be so judgmental. Perhaps she's a really beautiful person. No one choses to be fat, do they? I shouldn't hate fatties... *No, sod it—people are starving and this guzzling mass is gorging herself. And she took my seat, remember.*

I take a break from *Breaking Bad* and get out my Spanish text book, though I do a measly amount of revision. Really, I'm not going to get anywhere with it at this rate. The Walrus may be undisciplined with her food, but I'm undisciplined with my study. And most other things I'd like to master, for that matter. *Am I as lazy as she is fat?* I wonder. *Don't be silly—that's impossible: she's huge.* I really should stop calling her fat, and try and see the person. I really should find a kinder spirit, and drop the meanness. Maybe it's just the feeling I have about the week ahead, tainting everything.

I put on another episode of *Breaking Bad*, but only get three-quarters through before my laptop dies—a most frustrating end point, as the action was just peaking. I'd sighed more than once in sympathy for poor old Jessie, but denouement is cruelly denied. I tap the in-flight touch screen. *Time to Calgary 1:22. Distance to destination 742 miles.*

I don't know much about the place, other than it gets cold—really cold (and *if* I move there, it'll be just when that happens); it's near the mountains (great for those who love outdoorsy stuff and fresh air, which I certainly do. Fantastic—something positive!); it's largely built on oil and gas money; it's the most American part of Canada; and it's a little redneck (back to negative, then).

Whale-lady is coughing. *Aghh*. She probably has a pretzel stuck in her throat. Or Dorito-krill. She puts a clenched fist to her mouth to cover it, and her arm blubber wobbles like a bowl of pink jelly on a power plate. *God, now someone else is coughing!* Perhaps I should include a face mask in my flight-essentials pack. And sleeping tablets.

Her arm is just huge.

“Are you excited?”, a friend asked me a day earlier. I remember this now, as we make our final approach to land. No. Not like the time I was flying to Brazil, ten years earlier. Drawing down on Rio de Janeiro at night, the soft twinkle of thousands of lights below: people huddled around campfires sharing stories and merriment—or so I eagerly imagined—oblivious to me floating there above, peering down. Back alleys-turned-dance floors thrumming to the rhythm of forró and samba. Feijoada simmering in favela kitchen stew pots in preparation for a feast. Playful rivalry and sparing in Capoeira hondas. I wasn't thinking of the poverty, or drugs gangs, or prolific murder rate, of course. No, it was a new land and such adventure lay ahead—oh, how I remember that feeling! A world that had been brewing, awaiting my arrival, now ripe for tasting. A feeling no doubt accentuated by the classical concerto playing through my headphones reaching climactic crescendo.

Canada, too, is a new land. But the accompanying theme tune this time is an adagio of Pringle-munching half a seat away (yes *half* a seat). Not being excited, I tell myself, isn't necessarily a bad thing. Perhaps I've matured, and, knowing excitement and anticipation to be mere projections upon the unknown, I'm simply reserving judgment. How many times have I been excited about something, only to feel let down or disappointed? I ask myself. I can't think of any examples, but am sure there must be plenty.

Or, perhaps I am free from judgment entirely, indifferent in some Zen-like way. *Ha! Who am I kidding?* I'm not entirely sure I believe that the future *is* unknown. Brazil turned out to be a most unique and wonderful affair. Perhaps, in my belly, arriving that night ten years earlier, some part of me *had* known. Who's to say?

Whether I should be worried at the absence of any excitement now, arriving into Calgary—or at the start of any journey—I can't decide. It's an unfair comparison in many ways. This is a work thing, Brazil wasn't and I was still a student then, young, naive and carefree. Now I am... older. I choose to ignore the dull indifference with which I observe, through the cabin window, the new land approach and greet me with a bump. It looks very flat. Where are the mountains?! I'd Googled Calgary, and there were definitely been mountains. Did Photoshop fool me?!

“Don't go there!” I remember these words as we taxi to the terminal. A film maker I'd met on the London underground a few weeks earlier had said them when, discovering he was from Quebec, I'd mentioned my imminent trip to Alberta. No doubt his words have been in the back of my mind all along, enough to quell any excitement and even spark a little dread along with thoughts like, *why am I not a film maker?* (As a child I'd loved playing with cameras: filming family walks or crudely editing videos to make me appear Houdini [and my brother *disappear* in a puff of smoke]. And in the Amazon, by a strange play of events, I'd ended up making a documentary).

Am I wise enough to know one person's opinion shouldn't matter? Probably not. I asked if he was referring to Alberta's redneck reputation. “Hell, yeah!” he replied—the sort of phrase a tobacco-spitting redneck might use, I thought. My boss said I'd need to buy a pair of cowboy boots and hat (I didn't know if he was joking or not. I wouldn't buy them, even if he wasn't), and that Calgary was a little different from the rest of Alberta—not as conservative or hicksville. They had a gay Muslim mayor, for one. Perhaps they'd voted him in just to prove a point. Gay, straight, Muslim, Christian, *whatever*—as long as he was pro-business and pro-oil, I'm sure he was a right fit.

Immigration

Those of us towards the front of the queue for Immigration can hear a Customs Officer tell a guy to “go damn well fill the form out properly.” He's clearly having a bad day, or is just rude by nature (is anyone rude by nature?). Two young lads are next to bear the brunt of his irritation. “Did you even

read the instructions?” he bellows, thrusting a fresh form to each. “Go and fill it out properly. Now!”

Did he really just bark ‘now!’? I ask myself, incredulous.

“You’re doing a great job,” one the lads answers back coolly—American, by the sound of it—as they walk back to the line of increasingly nervous newly disembarked passengers. US immigration officials have a bad rep, but I was hoping they’d be nicer north of the border. I turn to the guy behind me, who’s looking over his own form, meticulously scouring it for errors no doubt, and say, “Charming!”

He looks up momentarily, says “He reminds me of my headmaster,” and goes back to checking his form.

There’s a 33.3% chance we’ll get that particular Customs Officer. Luckily I don’t—mine is friendly. He asks me about my stay in Canada, and I mention that I’ll be seeing my boss and having a few meetings, but am really just checking the place out before potentially moving here. I quickly realise I really should have thought about my story beforehand: I’m not sure what is and isn’t allowed. I don’t think I say anything amiss, but am asked to visit the Immigration Office before leaving the airport. *I probably shouldn’t have mentioned the meetings.* (I don’t have a work visa yet). The way the officer makes it sound optional (when of course it’s not), and smiles as he points the way, is a little disconcerting. But I think he is just a smiley kind of guy—unlike his colleague—and I’m just being paranoid. I’m a paranoid kind of guy.

I have a minute to get my story in order.

Don’t mention any work meetings, I remind myself, entering the office. *That’s probably not a good idea.* There are two people in there already, one sitting by the side, and one being seen to at one of several counters. It’s not clear how to proceed, so I take the initiative and head to one of the free counters. Bad idea.

“Wait behind the yellow line, Sir,” a female voice commands, stern and stentorious. *What line?* I see some vague demarcation on the carpet by the entrance as I about-turn, and when I reach it, see

the waist-height sign I'd missed: *Arret, Stop*. I guess I saw the French and stopped reading there (I don't have time for pride, arrogance, and rudeness, unless it's my own).

A moment later, the same voice calls me back to the counter to which I'd originally been heading. *Typical*. There's a big blond woman sitting there now. Big hair. Big voice. Big belly, I assume—engorged on her latest power-trip of the day. *God, they're not going to be as bad as in the US, are they?* I've had some nice ones there, but invariably they have this serious attitude to security, like, *don't fuck with me; this is the land of the free, and we're on a war footing with terrorists* (and any oil-rich country that doesn't have a puppet dictator or a corruptible democracy, of course). *Now, place your forefinger on the scanner... No! That's your ring finger, dumbass! FORE-finger!* (I assume that's when they check the extensive NSA database for any dubious phone calls, emails, texts, or bugged conversations with the neighbour over the garden fence you may have had since 9/11). There are no fingerprint scanners in Canada, at least at the Calgary airport; I notice the terminal is in the process of a revamp, however, so I'm sure they're not far off. Full-body scanners too. Maybe I should play up. That might put an end to this whole affair right away and get the decision as to whether to move to Canada or not made for me—sort of.

Miss Immigration inspects my passport, then me, and begins her brusque interrogation. All the questions you might expect, mostly to see if I am planning to work while I'm here or not, which of course I'm not—I'm here to check out the place, see if I like it, meet my boss who lives there (“you can call him if you like”)—that's all. I hope they don't check my luggage for contraband (suits, shirts and ties). She asks where I'm staying, and to see confirmation of my return flight. She doesn't seem entirely placated. Well, she hasn't smiled yet, but perhaps I'm expecting too much.

I start to entertain the idea I might not be granted entry. In fact, I feel a little nervous. Guilty even. I felt guilty even when telling the true parts of my story. Why, oh why, I'm so easily flushed with unjustified guilt, I've no idea. As a teenager, a police car going by would cause a quickening of the pulse and the pulling down of a hood to conceal my face. What was that? Some fantasy I was Al Capone? I wasn't brought up Catholic, so I can't blame that for my guilt complex. I expect having a neurotic mother who often liked to tell me how bad I was had something to do with it (I expect I was. I do vaguely remember a time when I was maybe 8 years old, the hairdresser came round and I

handed her a ball of Plasticine® and told her to squeeze it really hard. I'd put one of my mother's sewing needles in there.)

Perhaps it's just my personality type. One of my ex housemates in London was a self-professed "Enneagram expert" (years of training, I'm sure) and reckoned I was a Six. I'd looked it up online, of course; the ego loves indulging in such pursuits. Me, me, me. The irony is you discover you're not that unique at all; you're just a 'type', and plenty of others have your quirky traits too (it's probably also true of horoscopes, but surreptitiously). Damn it, I'm entirely predictable (and don't advertisers know it!). But the upside is, you don't feel so alone in your neuroses.

The questions cease, and there's just the clickety-tap-tap of fingers on a keyboard. It goes on for so long, I wonder if it's just for effect. The worst part would be getting on another flight so soon. I think about giving my nose another pump of the 10-hour decongestant spray there and then, just in case. The typing stops, the chair swivels and—saying nothing—she gets up and walks over to... (*phew*) a printer. Not her superiors' office; just an innocent little printer. But what would the printout say? BARRED FROM ENTERING?!

Why do I even care?

Because sales is all you're good for. And what with the 'crisis', new jobs are hard to come by...

Shh, mother.

Anyway, I worry, that's all. It's what I do. Inherited from you-know-who.

Her hand hovers over the output tray till it's fed my judgment. She sits back down, holding a single sheet of paper, which she adeptly folds three times and puts to one side. She leafs through my passport for a suitable page to maul, and staples it there. Then and only then does she look up and tell me—in a tone not too different to reading my last rites, I imagine—I have to leave the country by November 1st (*when is that?* I scramble to think. *Tomorrow? No, silly...* it's the day after my return flight), that I cannot partake in any work- or education-related activities for the duration of my stay, and should I be caught doing so it would affect any work visa application in the future.

"Have a nice trip, sir," she says, handing back my rumpled passport.

I take it, as I might take my savaged slipper from the mouth of the neighbours' pit bull, and quickly leave the office, in case the command to "give" and "roll over" wears off.

I'm relieved, but a worrier abhors a vacuum, and my next concern is my luggage—will it be there? It is, and it's easy to spot, because it's bright red and has gaffa tape wrapped around it (a precaution in case the zip breaks). However, I don't recognise any of the complimentary addition of several scuffs and dents.

The first thing I notice leaving the Arrivals terminal are the big cars pulling up to collect people, just like you see on film sets in America. I imagined they were more conscientious in Canada. *Ah, but this is Alberta, remember? Rednecks and rodeo.* I haven't spotted any cowboy hats, though. My Indian taxi driver certainly isn't wearing one; he has a turban instead.

Heading downtown

Calgary is famous for a 'stampede' that happens each summer, a week-long rodeo, country music festival, and general piss-up. According to my boss, everyone's in cowboy attire then, and you *have* to dress up. Even royal William and Kate donned the appropriate attire when they visited a few years back. It's "unmissable," he said; and "so much fun," according to Ryan, a Calgarian acquaintance in London. I know I'll hate it. You've more chance getting me in the queue for a full-body scanner at airport security than into *Quickdraw* western apparel. I wonder if my taxi driver has a specially-fitted hat in his wardrobe.

On the highway, I remember the immigration officer's words ("if you're caught doing so..."), and glance back through the rear window to check for a tail—an undercover Immigration Officer assigned to see what I got up to that week. I conclude it unlikely, and settle back into my seat.

I spot downtown Calgary several miles in the distance, a glimmering island of skyscrapers huddled together. Covering from the cold, no doubt, or perhaps the frightfully flat expanse all around them. I hate flat places. Rio, Lisbon, and Barcelona are three of my favourite cities. All far from flat. Rather, cobbled streets, dips and hills, sugar loafs and glorious vistas. *Where are the mountains? (My fresh air. My winter sports and hiking... Calgary's saving graces?).* I look in all directions.

Nothing. I was hoping they'd have a more imposing presence on the city. Discouraged, I focus back on our destination. It's then I notice them, past the cubes and spires of glass and concrete: a thin band of snowy peaks veiled in clouds, far in the distance. I can't really tell what is mountain and what is stratocumulus. They're further away than I expected, but there nonetheless.

I arrive at my hotel, an art-themed establishment imaginatively called *Hotel Arts* that Ryan recommended. There's a covered pool in a central courtyard opposite the reception desk. I assume it's used for the month or so each year summer graces Calgary. After asking for a tissue for my runny nose, I check in (a near-blinding experience thanks to the pearly-white smile of the receptionist and the LED spotlights above us) and make for my room. I have an hour and a half before I have to meet my boss for drinks downtown. I set an alarm as I ascend the lift—one of those mirror-adorned ones where you're ever shrinking self tumbles into some mysterious dimension—I always imagine it must lead somewhere, somewhere tangible, and if I can just get the angle right, the positioning, and say the magic word... No, nothing.

In my room—small, minimalist, but cosy; a huge painting above the bed, the bold brushes of red and chaotic splotches of gold depicting what, I couldn't say—I struggle with my laces, kick off my shoes triumphantly, and collapse on my bed (yes, without even popping into the bathroom to check what little soaps and shampoos await me, or opening the minibar). It's a big, deep, cavernous bed that swallows me whole... in an instant I fragment, ever-smaller versions of myself cascading off into some hidden slumber world made of mirrors. *Zzz.*

Ninety minutes later, I find myself in Calgary's downtown bar and restaurant district. It's pretty deserted, but it is a Monday. It's one pedestrianised street as far as I can make out, and pretty bland by all accounts. But I shouldn't be comparing it to London now, should I. I find the right bar and enter. There's a flight of stairs leading up to another door, a black one.

I hesitate at the bottom. *It's just up these stairs then...*

I imagine for a moment, that on the other side is myself at 40 in some sales office, haggard, drained, hopeless. Then that it's the door to some graveyard crypt; inside: decaying dreams. Premonitions of a life wasted.

From that charcoal oblong door I slinky-step my sight down each stair till I reach my feet. I notice my shoes need a polish, but it's how they *feel* that I focus on: the black leather pressing in comfortably, the supporting sole, the pressure of the floor; the entire Earth even, pressing gently up. I can't decide if it's reassuring or oppressive. Gravity, I mean. It just is, I guess (a phrase that if remembered more often, would serve me well).

I look at my left hand, gripping the black tubular banister. The contrast between the cool hard surface and the inner vacuousness I can't see but know exists is comforting somehow. Familiar.

Then, I'm looking up at the door again. Dread. Looking up, mustering the will and enthusiasm needed to carry me up the stairs and through it. Through the week.

I greet Brook my boss, the company's International Sales Director—and clearly not just a girl's name in Canada—and Mitch, Program Director, with firm handshakes, and place my BDM ass on a stool at their high table.

Brook asks me how my flight was, as one does, and offers me a beer. The waitress promptly appears, and I opt for cranberry juice. I feel exhausted: it's 7pm Alberta time, 2am UK time; plus there's my snuffly nose (prelude to man-flu?).

The bar is pretty empty, apart from several hundred little folk dressed mostly in red and white, cheering and waving, beamed *live* into our midst from a ceiling-suspended flatscreen a few meters away: ice hockey match in full swing. Full *vicious* swing; it's not a game I can see myself getting used to watching. It's just not cricket, as we British (never) say. I mean, they encourage fist fights, don't they. I bought a console game version of it as a teenager for that very reason. I wonder if a fistfight will break out then and there, secretly hoping it will, mostly so I can voice my incredulity.

It's a close up now—people are hammering the Perspex ringside barrier like they're trying to break free from the TV screen itself. The scene is repeated on another TV, and another—all the way up the bar, in fact. Seven flatscreens. Seven! *Jeezz*. At least the volume is turned down on each.

Brook tells me he used to play, and that he'd picked his eldest son up from hockey practice an hour earlier. I wonder if Brook's teeth are his own. I know ice hockey players, professional ones, don't keep theirs for long. *Vicious*, I tell you.

I've only ever spoken to Mitch on the phone. He's about 35, by my reckoning, lanky, with short light brown, almost ginger hair. He's wearing glasses: rectangular, rimless, expensive looking; a grey suit jacket, blue shirt, top two buttons undone; and those off-cream-coloured trousers Americans like to wear: chino types. I think we both expected each other to be older.

Madison, a Marketing Manager whom I haven't spoken to, but whose name I've seen on various internal emails, arrives five minutes after me. She and Mitch flew in from New York today, home of the company HQ. Mitch is the brain, the guy who helped develop the program we're delivering for the electricity board in Alberta. Brook and I are building a portfolio of companies to participate. And Madison—who is Spanish but married to an American (I learn this early in our conversation, almost as if she wants to prevent any flirting on my part)—I'm not sure *what* Madison's role is, as we don't really require any marketing. Our activities, Brook tells me, are somewhat 'under the radar'. This is to avoid any potential competitors trying to nestle in on the action.

Brook mentions he was working from Bankers Hall today. I know that's the downtown business complex where we had (in the past sense, I now discover) a serviced office. "I was working from the kitchen area and found it way too busy," he says.

Why weren't you in our office? I think, my brain conjuring the image of a shiny alarm bell and tapping 'MayDay' in Morse code.

"I don't like it there," he continues, "we'll find something better."

What?!

Admittedly, a month earlier when he'd visited me in London to propose the move to Canada, keeping the office was in doubt (apparently Finance was late on payment, or some equally dubious story). He assured me he'd "get it sorted" however, and a week ago when discussing the transfer package I'd receive, he confirmed we still had the office. Mixed messages: I hate that. Bullshit: I hate that even more.

Already feeling apprehensive about the move, I now have another reason to feel unsettled. I'm a *Six*. There's an ever-present murmur of anxiety to contend with. The Enneagram website told me. And damn, don't I know it anyhow. Apparently (clearly I spent more time researching my 'type' than researching Calgary), I try to build "a network of trust over a background of unsteadiness and fear". Well, I just lost signal on my crappy 'boss' network.

Thank god I'm not locked into this contract indefinitely, I think. Hit that 24-month mark and switch provider (employer), just like people do with mobile phones.

12 months to go...

My nose is running. Flustered, I reach for my right pocket, which is the *wrong* pocket: a warmish goo greets my probing fingertips (I have a system, you see: the wad of *clean* tissues in my *left* pocket becomes a nest of screwed-up cellulose and snot in the *right*). With a clean tissue I wipe my right hand—glancing about to see if anyone notices, but no, the ice hockey hooligans have their attention—and blow my nose.

It's ok, Dom, you're fine. Shit happens. Give Brook a break. Perhaps he's telling the truth.

Ok. But what worries me is what else might change: what other promises will be broken. I'm a *Six*; I need a "network of trust". A bulwark of assurance. I can "only move forward with some degree of confidence" if I "have sufficient backup." I remember all these things from the website. Especially the next part: "...and if that crumbles, you become anxious and self-doubting... and it awakens your deepest fear: 'I'm on my own! What am I going to do now?'"

Shit!

Oh, shush; you're not a number. Relax.

Hmm.

"The office is in a prime location," Brook had said to me in New York a few weeks earlier, of the office we no longer have. "It would be good for you, as you meet lots of other young professionals. I'm concerned you'll be lonely out there."

Yeah, right, I thought, catching whiff of *aux-de-manure*, again.

I couldn't imagine really wanting to hang out with random other "young professionals" from a shared office space. Work and social life is best kept separate, no? I couldn't see them

wanting to hang out with me, either; most ‘normal’ people find me ‘weird’. That’s fine. Time has shown me there are plenty of freaks on my wavelength who enjoy my weirdness.

“Brook, don’t worry about me being lonely,” I’d replied, knowing how independent and good at forging new connections I am (if not always hanging on to them). Plus alone doesn’t have to mean lonely, does it? Going through a phase of reading Osho in my twenties had taught me that. *Aloneness* is our nature; the peak of meditation; it doesn’t mean you don’t interact, but that you give and receive more fully when you *do* interact. *Hippie claptrap*.

The other is hell,’ I’d finally thought, before reaffirming: “No, Brook, I’ll be fine.”

*Jean-Paul Sartre

We leave the bar and head to a restaurant Mitch is keen to check out. He’s a self-confessed ‘foodie,’ and I think he’s done some research. It’s only a short walk down High Street. We pass a bus waiting at a red light. I notice a very pretty girl sitting on the back seat, and she notices me: a brief moment of eye contact, smiles bending space and bridging worlds. *I hope that’s not the only nice girl I see out here*.

I notice the thought, and wonder why I’d even anticipate that; why I seem to make it so hard for myself.

Damn, she’s gone now...

Why does it matter so much? Is she the one? I’m not stupid enough to think that anymore. But the imprint of the energy that once led me to, and often, still lingers. Old habits die hard, and all.

I walk on, wanting to look back, but resisting the temptation for once. I’m not alone; I’m with work colleagues. Damn it, where is glorious *aloneness* when I need it? I could jump on the bus at the next bus stop and speak to her as cupid intended and... and no longer be... alone? Wretched *aloneness*.

Click is a chic-looking establishment with simple cream leather seating, a wine rack stretching the length of one wall, elegant lighting—definitely not from Ikea—and fancy wallpaper. No artwork.

The open kitchen at the far end of the long, narrow restaurant affords one a view of chefs beavering away at your expense.

Brook, Mitch, and Madison each order the special—steelhead trout from Lake Lois (somewhere in the Rockies, apparently, so not too far away)—and a glass of white wine. I order the halibut and stick to tap water. I'm running on empty.

Their trout is “cooked to perfection” and “the best I've ever tasted,” according to Brook and Mitch, respectively. My halibut is pretty good, but how can you help thinking you've missed out, with reviews like that? At least with Mitch in town there will be plenty more opportunities to eat well this week.

I'm fading fast, counting the minutes till it's over. When Mitch orders dessert, and then coffee, it's pure endurance. When we're finally paid up (Brook's company credit card) and it's time to leave at about 8:30pm (3:30am UK time), to say I'm relieved is putting it mildly. *Sleep, wonderful sleep awaits; sanctuary of my soul, rejuvenator of my spirit, great eraser of barbed and troubled thoughts; wrap me in your dulcet arms and devour me—I'm yours...*

But first I need to get to the hotel, because passing out there in the restaurant lobby like a narcoleptic would not be a good look in front of work colleagues, much like chasing after a bus to get a girls' number (though I secretly harbour a wish I'd done this, and resent them for being there in that moment. What if she *was* the one?!)

And here you are: bed. Finally. Glorious. Horizontal. Ahh, the sweet smell of fresh linen. I'm out as soon as my head... (as quickly as one can cluck, “cliche”).

¹Jean-Paul Sartre