

The Roaming Moaner

1.

How soon after death does a body start to rot? If I snap her neck during take-off, will she stink out the plane before it lands in Cancun? My hand reaches for my phone to google 'putrefaction timelines', my fingers getting as far as my pocket before I realise I've cancelled my contract and the WI-FI is down. I fish it out anyway, its weight in my hand soothing like an adult comfort blanket. I bring up the WI-FI list and scroll to the airline I booked with. There it is, no padlock sign and a full signal symbol, but the triple-tiered tower of web-browsing power may as well be a tiny middle finger for all the good it is to me 'cause the words 'Unable To Join Network' flash up once again, the contradiction of the full coverage claim taunting me like a red sky to a flying bull. I try the other unlocked signals and get similar results, the denial of such a basic human right as web access fuelling my outrage, making both my eyeballs quiver and jitter.

Calm down Sam, you're not gonna murder anyone. She's just nervous about flying is all. She'll be fine when you're in the air. Until then, do what you normally do when faced with extreme conflict or everyday stuff that winds you up - compose an all-caps angry Facebook status. Pour your rage into your phone. Write something so devastating it'll be adopted as scripture in a fucked up future religion. Drop the odd vowels and then post it to Twitter. Sit back and laugh as it virals so hard it mutates into a physical pathogen that wipes out acne, celery and people that talk with their mouths full.

"But he had to stay behind in the end because of his work so he'll be catching another flight tomorrow. He's a lovely man is my son and I'm ever so looking forward to our holiday together" says the old lady for the third time, her spit-soaked words reaching my ears through a mouthful of sticky toffee. Her nasal snorts ripple my arm hair, prompting an almost uncontrollable urge to scream at her till I'm red in the face as I strain against handcuffs, locked away in an overhead compartment.

"His wife is such a dear. She met the queen once, so it's clear she was meant for someone special. Such a dear she is, so kind and supportive."

The combination of talking and chewing tires her out and soon she's pumping out nasal snorts like a fat marathon runner that's just sniffed up a wasp. A tiny drop of snot lands on my arm, nudging my phobic reaction over the physical level line, its pure liquid wickedness sparkling like a shard of glass in a kid's swimming pool. My nose goes all hot and stuffy like someone's jammed a big toe up there and's got ideas for the entire foot. There is snot on my arm and she's still fucking talking.

I massage my nostrils till the cartilage clicks then struggle to suppress a full body twitch, the harder I try the more pronounced it becomes till I'm trembling like an octopus with restless legs syndrome.

"And he's got a house in the City with a garden that's just lovely. He's a data analyst my son did you know? One of those modern jobs."

Yes. Yes, I did know. And it's a pity your son got his analytical genes from your absent, presumed dead husband or you'd have the ability to analyse my silence and leave me the fuck alone. I manage to show some restraint though, keep the screams internal. Partly because I don't wanna get thrown off the plane but mainly because I'm not a complete bastard. Just a man with a phobia of the sound of people eating, and a deep dislike of one-sided small talk.

“And my grandson, oh he's ever so clever. You should see him doing his jigsaw puzzles, such an intelligent little one. Did I show you a picture already?” She rummages around in her handbag, her claw-paw stirring up the twin aromas of old tissues and expired mints.

A stream of inappropriate thoughts flood through my mind, each one more violent and cruel than the last: water-boarding her with boiling-hot dog piss; peeling her skin off and rolling her in salt; stapling her to a tree and feeding her her own shins. I start to worry I'll lose self-control and act out whatever messed up thought is racing through my mind, like when you're in a job interview and you're wilting under all the sustained eye contact and your mind burps out a worst case scenario and then suddenly you're terrified you'll have a momentary lapse and start mooning the effeminate man from HR.

I jump off the murder train before it derails, jam in my earphones and scroll through my tunes. I pick something loud and shouty, fight fire with fire. It's a tried and tested tactic, one I like to employ when deferring a nasty hangover via the purchase of yet another bottle of rum, the shame and stink of a morning drinker camouflaged by a constant smile that says 'I'm an early-rising consumer that's shopping ahead for tonight's Caribbean themed dinner party'.

The music kicks in and a wobbly burp voice starts screaming about pain and death. I catch eyes with a flight attendant three rows over and he visibly bristles before making his way over. He looks me in the eyes, acknowledges my acknowledgement yet still feels the need to tap me on the shoulder. As I reach for the pause button the evil air steward with his plastic sarcastic smile and eyes full of hate does an outrageously camp impression of someone removing earphones. I press pause and stare at him. He repeats the mime a few more times, looking like a member of a Village People tribute act. The weak link, soon to be replaced 'cause his bad shoulders won't let him do an M in the big YMCA finale.

“I'll be honest with you mate, the mime was unnecessary,” I say without moving my jaw. “I'm well aware a tap on the shoulder means please give me your attention.”

“I'm sorry Sir but electronic devices are not permitted during take off.” He gives me one of those tight-lipped, sarcy smiles you only get from surly teens and passive-aggressive service staff.

“But we're not taking off. The fasten seatbelt sign isn't even on. We've been sat here on the runway for an hour now.”

“We'll be taking off soon Sir. In the meantime, electronic devices are not permitted during take off.”

“That doesn't even make sense. Look, can you please talk to me like a real person and not just repeat yourself like some shit 80's robot.” He points at me, elbow, arm and floppy wrist forming a Z shape that looks like a naked snake puppet.

“Sir, please do not swear at me or I will be forced to take action”. He says this with a back and forth finger wag, giving it the gay slap-down stereotype, head bob punctuating each word and

reminding me of a childhood friend with tunnel vision trying to keep up with a NYE fireworks display. I'm about to argue that shit's not a swear word, my hand fingering my phone for web-based backup when there's a crack to my left as my tormentor tests her false-teeth on a bag of ineffective gobstoppers.

"It's okay young man, I'll keep you company till the plane takes off" she says through shards of solidified sugar. "I wasn't supposed to be flying alone you know. My son was going to accompany me but..." I dig out my earphones, close my eyes and try a trick I learnt from my anger management therapist.

A newspaper forms in the foreground, partially obscuring the flashing red background that pumps out an order to kill. A headline appears, text that says 'she's old Sam, don't be rude'. The area below's populated by a selection of calming GIF's: a misty morning meadow, a kitten spinning on a turntable, a Slinky forever flopping down an up escalator...

It doesn't work. All I can think about is the kitten scratching the record and the slinky getting jammed between the escalator steps. I try the same technique but with a slight change in perspective. A mangled Slinky juts from the steps of a stationary escalator; a neon sign directs shoppers to a flight of uneven and dimly lit emergency stairs; the headline above reads 'HUNDREDS DEAD IN SHOPPING STAIR PILEUP'. A little concerned at how calm I am now I open my eyes, have a quick failed check of Facebook and then go back to writing a moan on my phone.

An hour later we're flying over Ireland and she's still jabbering away, past the point of ignorance and deep in the murky swap of senility. I tried reading a book on my Kindle for a while but the words only got as far as my eyes before her voice washed away their meaning. I tried pretending to watch a film on the seat screen in front but my fake laughs at Schindlers List were completely ignored. So now I'm back to shouty music. She's still oblivious though, still droning away. Her voice vibrates through my chair causing me anger and guilt and utter despair, a three-way war of emotions, the battle in my brain loud enough to drown out everything but her voice and my own tortured thoughts. And all the while she completely ignores the guy in the window seat. Damn my friendly face, the mask that hides the rage inside. I should start dressing more provocatively: an SS armband, a priest outfit and a bag of toys, a copy of my web browsing history hanging from a chain round my neck. Well this is a great fucking start to the trip.

All of my friends said I should go travelling. Literally all of them and I don't use that word lightly. Friends that grew increasingly distant over the years what with their kid's swimming lessons and their couples nights out and their impossible number of grandparent funerals. "Go away and see the world" said my Anglophile friend. "Go away and find yourself" said his palm reading wife. "Oh fuck off you hippy" said I. "I won't be able to see you anymore" said he to the garden path as I scoffed my slice of cheesecake in the rain.

A pattern formed and spread through my life like an oil spill on a dank British beach. My friends turned into closet travel agents, our bimonthly meet-ups taking on a distinct travelly feel. I was forever on the receiving end of a stuttery sales pitch. You can't start a sentence with 'oh, random fact' when that fact is yet another working holiday visa requirement. That's just not fucking random is it? It was all so transparent. And we each knew the others knew, but we pretended not

to so we could salvage what remained of our decaying friendship. Always pint five it was. I'd be waiting to hear it and they'd be waiting to say it. It was like they'd done research, found the fifth pint's the sweet spot and waited till then to have the 'spontaneous' idea that I should sell all my shit and go travelling somewhere. Preferably somewhere in an opposite time zone, reducing all future contact to slept-through Skype calls and easy-to-ignore emails.

Yeah I knew I needed to make some changes, but it wasn't the pleads of those closest to me that've resulted in the hell that I currently dwell. First up, I ran out of lighters. Seems like nothing I know, but if you give me a lighter I'll spark up my fag then immediately pocket your property. It's not an intentional act, more an evolutionary trait passed down from cavemen that were always misplacing their, I don't know... toothpicks? Made from... the teeth of... sabre-toothed tigers? Did Cavemen even have pockets? My hand drifts down to my phone to google 'inventor of the pocket' when my lack of web access saddens me once again, more at how saddened I am by its absence than the actual absence itself.

Anyway, because of this unintentional thievery I always had a collection of lighters that grew from bowl to box to drawer. The day I realised the drawer'd run dry was the day I knew I had to get out more. Nothing drastic at that point - join a Scrabble club or be one of those losers that spends every night sat on the same barstool, chatting to staff they think of as friends, either too stupid or too lonely to admit that the stock responses and service staff smiles are a result of professional courtesy and actually, they think you're a sad, lonely wanker with B.O. and bad breath. No, what pushed me to book a flight was this prize tool at a bus stop. He was talking on his phone, boasting about his gap year travels - or as he called them his 'war stories' - completely disregarding standard procedure when talking in public, the traditional 'waiting-room whisper' swapped for 'attention-seeking dickhead on a phone'.

"The Americas? Oh yah for reals man. It was like, totally wild. We travelled from Mexico all the way down to darkest Peru. It's one big party though you know? Cause like, every night's a Saturday night when you're on the road yo. And the male to female ratio is like, 50/50 so it's all shots and shower sex for the boys, whoop whoop! Totes depressed to be back and all but, you know, nothing the chaps and some Chinese food wont sort out!"

His conversation ended abruptly. Hung up on I imagine, or maybe his battery ran out from scrolling through yesterday's selfies. I started to get a bit excited. Acceptable daily drinking? 50/50 gender ratios? This was sold to me all wrong. Going away to 'find yourself' is for bible campers and romance novels, for those that think they're meant for greatness but can't be arsed with the leg work; the kind of arrogant wankbags that think a step outside their comfort zone will expose a hidden depth, a potential that matches their arrogance allowing them to crack the cocoon of everyday life, free to emerge as a suntanned butterfly that shuns the snooze button and makes his own soup. Fuck that bullshit. I wanted to go away to fuck and get fucked.

I thought back to what friends had said during their awkward sales pitches, their commission an enthusiastic BJ from the missus for finally getting rid of me.

"You see your problem Sam is you hate everyone" said frenemy #3. "But you'd like the people you meet on the road. It takes a certain type of person to leave their comfort zone behind and go

travelling for an extended period. Meeting twenty people a day for months on end, you've gotta be reasonably confident you're not a complete cunt. It means you end up hanging around with the crème de la crème of each nationality. Maybe keeping that kind of company for a while will remind you of all the good that's in the world. Your problem Sam, is that you're always living in the past, always comparing everything to your life before she left. Reminiscing isn't living you know?"

Ignoring the possibility that all other travellers could be like the posh whoop whoop wanker at the bus stop who probably classed riding the bus that day as a war story, I abandoned my trip to town for more cider and walked back to the shared shit-hole I called home. Everyday things took on greater meaning, just like it does in the movies. The sky was still the colour of granny muff and the birds in the trees were still noisy flying shit-bags but the litter in the gutter... a crushed lager can, a burrito wrapper, a quarter filled condom. That gutter could be my life! My empty beer can, my burrito wrapper, my used condom, discarded on a busy road outside a pre-school.

I didn't even feel the need to lecture the guy on correct emphasis after he pronounced it Chinese FOOD as in food from China instead of ChiNEESE food the cuisine. I'd had my epiphany and it'd overcome my contempt for the type of people that have epiphanies. I went home and googled the word 'backpacking' and, after watching a series of disturbing videos in which people slid household objects into open back wounds I found more relevant content and read for four hours straight, smashing my personal best for tit-free browsing by three hours and fifty-five minutes.

I texted my boss and asked her what my notice period would be. She responded with a phone call, on a Sunday, making no effort to hide her excitement as she told me my text could serve as my official resignation and I needn't worry about notice. I internalised my distress at being so easily discarded and spent a small portion of last decade's social fund on a flight to Cancun, Mexico with the intention of travelling south, choosing Central America over South East Asia 'cause of the lack of cheese in oriental cuisine. Had I've known a last minute flight would subject me to spring break and all its painful enthusiasm I would've waited a few weeks or gone by fricking freighter. But sat there, staring at the booking confirmation page on my monitor I really believed I'd been given a chance to forgive the human race, to start enjoying life again. No more picturing every scenario going sour and preparing my argument in advance. No more plodding through life with a head full of hate.

"He's six now my grandson and oh so smart. I'm sure he'll grow up to be a doctor or something."

How anyone can talk this long without response or acknowledgement is beyond me. I refuse to believe her son's allowed her travel alone with early-onset dementia. The only explanation I can think of is he used her as a drug mule. She must have bottled it at the airport and gummed all the coke in the toilets. But then, who the hell smuggles cocaine from England to Mexico? I try thinking of alternative theories but I'm distracted by the realisation that I just reminisced about a time I reminisced about a time a friend told me a I reminisce too much. The irony gives me a moment of clarity and I realise I've been rocking in my chair like a mental man with an itchy ring.

"You okay there pal?"

I turn to face the guy across the aisle. He's young, Irish, hope-he-gets-cancer-handsome and giving me the kind of smug smile that says 'I want to help you cause I'm one of the good guys'. What an arrogant, do-gooding tosspot. How dare he belittle my problems, thinking he can solve all my ills with some old-country wisdom his nanna taught him or some motivational pep talk he read on a toilet wall.

He tops up a plastic cup of coke from a bottle of whisky he's got stashed in his bag then passes it over the aisle to me. It's Jesus handing me the holy grail, an agent handing a pantomime script to a reality TV star, a lifeguard saving a teenaged boy and then dragging him to shore with his head in her cleavage. I hold the drink in both hands like a stock photo titled 'flu man with soup' and take a 'first pint on a Friday' sized gulp.

"Cheers mate" I say, my typical English reserve trumping my almost overwhelming gratitude. The stuffiness drains from my nose and my stress levels drop from critical to severe, the explosive anger extinguished by the warm belly tingle that comes from the day's first drink. Of course! Alcohol! The cause and solution to all life's problems, balancing each other out on the see-saw of self-abuse. I'd planned to resist the on-flight drinks 'cause each mini bottle costs a days budget abroad but really, I should've been reaching for the crutch and cokes long before the plane took off.

I turn to thank the third coming of Jesus who must've been reborn in Ireland to help out all the gingers. I want to thank him for whisky and pizza, for smartphone based porn in your pocket. I wanna declare my allegiance to the light when the devil makes a last-ditch play for my soul.

"He's ever so clever, so much like his father." CRUNCH. SCHLOB, SCHLUUB. "You just know he's meant for great things." *HEAVY NASAL SNORT* "He's got so much potential. And he's almost seven now. Doesn't time fly young man?"

I knock back the last of the whiskey, ignoring the eyes of the Irish guy in case he offered me a sip and not the whole cup. As the alcohol fuels the fire inside and swells my figurative testes, I finally turn to acknowledge her presence. "Sorry but no. Time doesn't go fast or slow, it just goes. Your perception of it might change depending on your age but no, it doesn't go fast."

"Well it seems to fly by for me deary" she says with a saccharine smile and gentle leg pat, the pat not quite hard enough to justify me punching her in self-defence. Oh shit what have I done? Why did I respond to her? Now I'm gonna have to feign illness and spend the flight curled around one of the toilets because we're at capacity, there's not a single spare seat and I'm not sitting here for twelve fucking hours.

"It flies by compared to what? Your previous life?" Right, here's my chance. If I'm really rude to her then maybe she'll leave me alone. Finish what you've started Sam, don't wimp out. Be a real man and tell this friendly old granny to fuck the fuck off. "If your life's gone too quick then maybe you should've filled it with more memorable moments."

Brutal I know, and I feel bad saying it but it'll be worth it in the long run. I wait for a look as cold as the shoulder I've earned and fully deserve but instead she gives a shake of her head like I'm too

young to understand and then launches into another round of 'My Wonderful Son.' I smell the faint aroma of burnt toast and pray it's a brain tumour about to burst from the altitude.

“Hey pal, do you wanna swap seats with me?”

I turn round to face Irish Jesus and let out a whimpery yes. He grabs his bag, steps up the aisle and I dive into his seat without thinking. Then I consider his motives. There's three guys to my right wearing matching T's. I can't make out the design but I'm guessing they're part of a stag party – a group of testosterone-charged males heading to Spring Break Central to bang bikini-clad babes with self-esteem as low as their standards, oblivious to the fact that so are all the other guys, all the world's penises combining to create one gigantic sausagefest. Fortunately for me they're all in hibernation mode - earphoned-up and staring at phones.

“Why would you do that?” I ask my new best friend, a title vacant for ten years or more. He shrugs like it ain't no thang.

“Karma.”

Karma. Ha. Well that's a big pile of bullshit right there. A couple of months ago a shop lady gave me £9 change instead of the 9 pence I was due. I pointed out the error, gave her back the cash and the gratitude I got, it was easily worth the £8.91 I'd traded it for. I gathered my assorted selection of poisons and headed towards the exit, off in my own little world, wondering what form my karmic payback would take when I walked into the door and bloodied my nose, the spurts of ruby fluid relegating my favourite work shirt down to the level of 'token gesture Halloween outfit'.

“Karma my arse” I say, challenging his belief system because I don't know the Irish word for thank you.

“Let's just say one guy helping out another.” He looks like I felt when I gave back that £8.91. Maybe it's true then, maybe it really is better to give than to receive. Especially if your girlfriend's got tetanus or adult braces.

“I'm Conor by the way.”

“Sam” I say, giving his hand a manly double pump.

“If you wanna buy yourself some cokes and top'em up with my whiskey” he taps the bag at his feet, “you're more than welcome. Just try not to get it confiscated yeah?” He takes a couple of ear plugs from his pocket and an eye mask from his bag, plugs and slides them into place then signs off with a double thumbs up. The old lady looks baffled, her mouth opening and closing like a taken aback trout. I turn away and get to work, thinking up believable details to pad out my story of how the cabin crew took the whiskey and I paid to get pissed.

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Twelve hours later the fasten seat belt sign pings on. A passing air steward nudges Conor awake and motions for him to get strapped in. He removes the headgear and does a full-body stretch, his splayed arms looking like a soggy swastika. After he's reached the stretch apex he slumps back into his chair like he's just woken up in a five star hotel. The jammy git's only gone and slept through the entire bloody flight. In that time I've watched three Adam Sandler films of decreasing quality and read the first four pages of A Brief History Of Time. He cracks another yawn then turns to look at me.

“Aaa uuoo aavelineee oornnhoodaa.”

What the smeg does that mean? I offer him an inquisitive uh, complete with rising inflection. He repeats his weird warble. Is this some kind of vocal exercise they teach in Irish schools? One to ready the paddy for the days to be suring? Or maybe a prayer for protection from life's otherwise inevitable alcohol-related injuries? I look away, not wanting to intrude on the private times between man and his mad superstitions when he has a third crack at speaking the queen's, the guttural growls growing sharper and solider until recognisable words emerge.

“Are you travelling, or on holiday?” he asks with a visible effort.

“Travelling.”

“You booked anywhere in town?”

“Nah, I'm winging it” I say, hoping he doesn't think I'm making an intentional airplane pun.

“I know a good hostel. Stayed there before.” He confirms the accuracy of this statement with a head nod that lasts just long enough to rock himself back to sleep.

2.

The plane sidles up against the terminal and comes to a stop. Some cunt behind me starts clapping. The fasten seat belt sign turns off and we all do a spot of modern British line-dancing, where everyone stands up and the aisle people spend five minutes 'after youing' and 'no I insist'ing whilst everyone else stretches and patiently waits. Queueing's great 'cause the longer the queue the greater the reward. It's a symbol of all that's fair and right with the world. Also, it takes the competitive element out of things. If bars, pubs and clubs implemented a ticket system like in deli's and butchers then we could all spend more time staring at our phones and less time constant eye-contacting the server and silently losing our shit when some Jilly-come-lately gets served first.

Eventually we all troop off the plane and some prick shouts 'SPRING BREAK, WOO' and I smile instead of scowl which is a major milestone for me. Maybe this is it, the turning point. Maybe everything so far has been a tricky tutorial to train me for what's to come, the path behind shit-stained lino, the path ahead shining with golden tiles and honey-roasted hams.

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Two hours later we exit the terminal and follow the transit signs. My mood has taken a tumble. Really, the trip doesn't start till the first hostel I tell myself knowing full well it starts the second you leave your house.

"It's just a bit of a rookie move is all, buying a black backpack" says Conor, giving me the kind of well-intentioned advice that's too late to be anything but annoying. "And to be fair to the guy, you do walk like you've got a bum full of drugs."

"Fuck off."

"Alright princess, chill out."

"I'd rather spend hours searching for a generic black bag than cart round that monstrosity." I motion towards the bag hanging from his shoulders, a bag he snagged off the carousel within minutes of it moving, the pastel shade of pink long defiled by a suspicious set of red and brown stains.

"Don't knock my bag man, it's a conversation starter."

"Yeah, but what about all the stains?"

"To a real road boy, a true traveller, a stain is a badge of honour pal. Shit gets dirty when shit gets wild. This you'll soon learn."

"A real road boy? You're having a laugh. Tell me Conor, how long have you been living in London for?" A bit mean I know, highlighting his hypocrisy but I know I'm right; he's pale as fuck even for an Irishman which means plenty of time has passed since he's used that backpack but in my defence I'm tired and stressed out from the threat of a cavity search. I'm relieved I've made a friend though – relief being my favourite emotion, it's giddy high only cheapened by its short livedness – so I probably shouldn't be insulting him but he takes it well, confirming his suitability as a friend and making me wonder if I'm back at home and all of this is a dream I'm having after watching Air Force One or Snakes on a Plane.

"They didn't give me a cavity search."

"I know."

"How do you know?" He shrugs. I suppose you can tell a lot from someone's gait.

"Thanks for waiting though."

"No problem pal" he says, giving my shoulder a companionable pat that makes me flash with heat and wonder if I'm gay. I used to decide whether I was hungry by asking myself if I wanted to eat a cheeseburger. I suppose in this scenario I can achieve the same aim by asking if I want to put his penis in my mouth. No, I most definitely do not. I'm just not used to strangers making sacrifices for me, waiting an hour for someone they know nothing about apart from an intolerance of old

chompy women. It's a man crush sure, but it's fully justified. And anyway, you can like your new TV without wanting to put your dick in it.

We stand at a cross-roads, one way to the buses the other the taxis. I tell Conor in the least whiny voice I can muster that I'm too tired to spend another hour on a packed, sweaty bus with sealed windows and no AC. There's no judgement from him though; he's as unflappable as a wingless swan in a coma. He leads the way to the taxi booth and slides an American twenty to the man sat behind. The note skips the till and goes straight into a pocket. The guy makes a noise that's a grunt in any language and points towards an old minibus, the kind with sealed windows and no AC.

Unlike a bus our 'taxi' waits until it's full before setting off on a route that favours wealthy tourists. I turn on a fan that's built into the door but it's as useful as a toast rack in a single man's flat, blowing hot air that smells like a barbecued cat. We start chatting to the other youngsters on the bus – an American couple on their honeymoon. They're so in love it's sickening. I ask them where they're staying and she raves about their hotel's five star facilities. She looks at him like a hungry dog at dinnertime, the number of stars attributed to their accommodation a distraction from the fact that he's ignored the many near-by Caribbean islands with sky-high romance scores and instead booked two weeks in Cancun – the STI capital of the world.

We sit through multiple stops, each one met by eager doormen with smiles as big as their outstretched hands, the tourists starting their holidays proper as they waddle their way to their dry-land cruise ships, destined never to leave the complex, days spent lounging around the pool, nights the hotel bar, two sedentary weeks fuelled by all you can eat buffets serving American cuisine, the holiday identical to any other, the only thing changing from place to place the serving staff's skin colour and the pre-flight jabs.

Then it's just us, Conor and I, the adventure-seekers, happy to swap CCTV and security guards for the real deal, the authentic experience, the massive financial savings. The fresh black tarmac and spotless side-walks turn to pot-holes and toxic trash. We stop at a set of traffic lights and watch dumbstruck as a pair of homeless twins fight over a three-legged patio chair. On the other side of the street there's a row of three neighbouring laundrettes, each one guarded by an identical sentry, a trio of overweight ladies on sagging stools, shifting their glares between the other two like swinging searchlights of scorn. I picture the boardroom meetings, the stuffed suits deciding on their business strategy.

“Gentlemen” says exec #3, dreaming of a double promotion. “The way to bankrupt our rivals and increase our market share is to concentrate on offering our existing clients a dependable, high-quality service combined with a flexible can-do attitude. Word will soon spread and we'll become the area's main provider of cradle to grave laundry solutions.”

A 1930's American mob boss complete with moustache, cigar and jaunty hat snorts derisively. “Little boys with their little ideas, so unversed in the ways of the world.” The other board members lean forward in their chairs and exchange excited glances.

“Please strategy Don, enrich us with your words.”

“The solution is simple. Employ a big, fat, squinty-eyed slag to sit out front and intimidate the other shops into closing.”

“But then who will do the laundry?” asks exec #3.

“Fuck it” says the mob boss. “It's only a bit of washing. Anyway, I've got two more meetings to get to.”

I'm jerked outta my daydream by a screeching of brakes and the impact of my head against metal. The driver hops out and throws our bags onto the pavement, attracting the attention of a nearby pack of dogs. We jump off the bus and the second our feet hit the concrete the driver drives off without so much as a 'thank you for choosing The World's Shittest Taxi Service'.

We shoulder our bags and head towards a blue door set in a wall of white. I take the lead and push through into my first ever backpacker hostel. The gate opens onto a garden of sorts, a patch of grass maybe ten metres squared. Three sides of the compound are lined with hammocks which delights me no end. The good kind as well, the type with whole fabrics, not the mesh ones that leave your topless self looking like a human-crocodile hybrid.

The walls surrounding the courtyard are covered in geographically inaccurate, aquatic-themed murals: a polar bear giving a penguin a piggy back; a trio of dolphins leaping in formation; a walrus trying to bluff a shark with a pair of threes, all blissfully unaware of the nearby killer whale socially cleansing the ocean. A mermaid catches my eye and follows my path across the grass like the Mona Lisa only blonde and with bigger tits.

Across from us stands the hostel building, a single story structure with one door and no windows. Tarpaulin extends from the roof and covers a DJ booth to the left and a set of picnic tables on the right. The benches are full with happy whoopers and I'm treated to an insight into what backpacking is really all about - sacking off sightseeing to nurse a hangover, the day spent chatting to randoms, playing cards and drinking away the pain till the sun comes up and the process starts over.

I know I've got no point of reference here, nothing to compare it to but I immediately fall in love with the place. In my experience the bigger something is the smaller you become. A five-floored chain hostel might have better facilities but you'd end up splitting into school-like cliques. A place this small means everyone gets to know everyone, our social apartheid abandoned in a real world Garden of Eden where personality can punch through the armour of attractiveness, the weak spots exposed by the insecurities we all feel from forever being on the move, never settling into a zone of comfort.

We walk past the tables with a nod and a smile. The girl's eyes skip over my garden salad and linger on Conor's Irish stew, their eyes, smiles and vulvas swelling like the novelty 'grow your own girlfriend kit' I was given as a sarcastic secret Santa gift, the cigarette sized doll swelling to 'call a plumber' sized proportions when I tried to flush it down one of the work toilets. Good-looking, seat-giving, easy-talking git. Can you hate someone for being likeable and still like yourself? I really

hope I can be Robin to his Batman, that his UV rays shine on us both and don't leave me in the shade. God I hope I get to have sex.

Behind the reception desk sits a local girl with red eyes and a dopey smile. She bids us a good day, gives a quick introduction to the premises before moving onto the important stuff – the location and opening hours of the nearest alcohol shop. We book in for three nights, our passport details stored in a ledger I fear won't be kept in a secured location in accordance with standard Data Protection Regs. She hands us each a set of keys, a scrap of paper with the Wi-Fi code on it and a couple of stained, scentless bed-sheets before sinking back into her chair with a mumbled promise to join us that evening for the infamous Tequila Tuesday.

With the words tequila and Tuesday bouncing round my brain I wander up the corridor and track down our room. I take the lead again, pushing open the door with an excited smile that melts into an ugly grimace. The smell hits me like a swinging bag of unwashed cocks - which is likely the source of the smell - and as I tiptoe from gap to gap across the vast floordrobe the stench grows stronger and somehow more sinister. I dump my bag on a relatively stain-free pile of pants and spread my sheet over one of the plastic-wrapped mattresses as best I can without going to the extreme lengths of actually tucking it in. I lie down for a second, the Wi-Fi password burning a hole in my pocket, but before I can feed my addiction to time-wasting websites the sleepless hours of the last few days catch up with me and I go find the Sandman to tell him he's abrasive.

*

A number of noxious lungfuls later I wake up with a start, head-butting the planks of the bunk above. For a second I think I'm in prison having salt-rolled that woman on the plane, then it all comes back with a slap. Night-time sounds drift from out front and in through the dorm door. A baseline beats a backing track for the happy drunken vocalists doing life stuff in the heart of the hostel. This is it. This is where it starts. Time to go meet my first group. If I fuck it up by, I don't know... making an inappropriate paedophile joke or pissing myself in public then the soured relationships will spread like a virus, each person telling ten people who then tell ten people and then everywhere from here on out it's stares, glares and bags on chairs.

To calm my anxiety attack I fish out the Wi-Fi code from my wallet, boot up my beloved and set up camp in my happy place. I start with the Facebook app on my phone, just to check nobody still cares then move onto Sky Sports News to see which of my football team's players are thinking of moving to a bigger club. A twenty minute browse through the front pages of Imgur and Reddit appeases my need for GIF's, memes and pet pics then a quick check of the BBC news app, only taking in the headlines for now - maximum awareness, minimum comprehension. I appease my OCD with a final check of Facebook, just in case there's been some contact in the last fifteen minutes. There hasn't. No 'have a great time' or 'all the best'. Nothing from family. No 'let us know you've landed safely' or 'we needed the spare room after all so your stuff's been moved to what's left of the shed'. I'm staring at a newsfeed that's more pages than people when the tail end of my nap laps out, giving me a propped-on-elbow daydream.

Me: hey Guardian, any chance you could post fewer personal accounts of gender inequality, discrimination and mental illness? They're all a bit samey and they're bumming me out.

Buzzfeed: but Sam it's important these people are given a voice and that their problems are shared again and again and again and again. Possibly in list format.

Me: shut up BuzzFeed. In fact, you can fuck off as well. You love Friends and man-buns, we get it.

Skittles: I'm concerned about Skittle inequality. People think purple Skittles are more awesometastic than yellow or red but they all come from the same superriffic rainbow!

KFC: yessuh ah agree. It mebbe shaped like a leg o' it mebbe shaped like a win' but it all comes fum th' same fingerlicken', steroid drippin', fucked up looking GM chicken!! Yee haw!! Fry mah hide!!!

The Loosest Aussie Bloke Ever: you're all fuckwit cunts, yous can go fuck yourselves.

Ricky Gervais: yeah shut up the lot of you. I'm gonna have a quick bath with my cat then we're all gonna go shoot some poachers.

Britain First: as long as they're black.

The throb of my thirty year-old shoulders drags me back from my daydream so I pocket my phone and head outside to start the journey proper, to meet this crème de la crème of humanity. Halfway up the hall a prickle of paranoia poisons my mind causing me to run back to the room for my Kindle - a prop in case no one talks to me and I end up sat by myself.

Outside, the party's in full swing. There's a Latino guy in the DJ booth nodding to the beat with a pair of headphones held to one ear, his face set all serious like as the music plays and the turntables sit at a standstill. The same lot from earlier are still sat at the tables, staring intently at a Jenga tower that's a lady fart from falling. A few odd-bods are dancing about in such a devil-may-care way that their lack of rhythm is seen as a show of confidence to be applauded and not the cringe-worthy dad dancing that should be discouraged. Pushing judgements aside for a second I notice something encouraging. Everyone's smiling. Everyone. Well, apart from the Master DJ who's frowning in concentration as he picks out the next compilation mix. I start moonwalking back to the room to drop off my Kindle when I hear my name shouted in a happy Irish lilt. I smile and stop my moonwalk mid-crater. So he hasn't forgotten me then. I wasn't just a stopgap till he found a group more suited to his social status. He didn't watch me from afar, giving me the acquaintance nod before returning to his place as King of the Cool Kids.

My attempt to disguise my relief results in such over-exaggerated nonchalance that I click my fingers and point at him. Think the Fonz stood in front of a mirror and approving of his hair. Oh god, please save me from myself. I walk towards the tables and sit down in the only vacant spot, in between two very attractive women. Across from me sits Conor, the big cock accompanied either side by two ball guys that're tanned, taut and I assume total twats. There's another guy sat at the end, facing the fence and glued to his phone.

I have a second crack at nonchalance, a good morning that's meant to explain my absence and justify my hair but instead it makes me look like someone who thinks they're funny but aren't. What you gonna do next Sam? Go brrr it's cold and rub your arms? You loathsome choad. They wear the smiles of people backing away from a mental street man, staying calm and friendly till they're out of reach of a knife or an AIDS-covered needle.

This isn't helping. I was expecting to surround myself with plump people. The kind with acne, sandals and social issues. Instead I'm surrounded by prom kings and beauty queens, the type of people I never see anymore 'cause they only frequent the more exclusive establishments, their presence in a high street pub or small town club the result of a school reunion or a 'live like a commoner' theme night that ends in repeated rejections of over-weight, plain-faced plebs whose sense of self-worth has been bolstered by booze.

"This is my friend Sam" says Conor like we're best mates, making me cool by association. Names are swapped and hands are shaken and by the time I'm two shakes deep I realise I've already forgotten their names. I remember a tip I was once given by someone whose name I don't recall - when someone tells you their name, think of their celebrity namesake and twin them in your mind. Then, when you look at them you remember the celeb and the name's there for the taking. The problem with this is you have to remember to employ the memory trick in the first place, which is difficult if you're the kind of person that needs memory tricks to remember things. I make a mental note to come up with a memory trick to remind me to use memory tricks then turn to the pretty blonde to my right, mental note already long forgotten.

"I am freja" she says in the tuneful tone of the Sweeds. "Nice to meet you Freja, I'm Sam" I say, abandoning the celebrity thing and repeating the words deep fat fryer over and over. The moody man who's name is... Randy, he turns to face us, puts down his phone and snatches a brick sending the Jenga tower tumbling. His sour, sneery face stands out among the crowd of happy grinners telling me I've found a kindred spirit. I look forward to sharing pet hate lists with him long after the others have gone off to have sex.

The girl to my left doesn't offer her name, just keeps staring at the splintered wooden slats that serve as a table in this world and a compensation claim everywhere else. I force the issue, knowing the only way to get comfortable is to know those around me. "I'm Sam" I say, drying my hand on my shorts before giving her the horizontal 'ladyshake' I always feel the need to give women who shake. "Elakshia" she says in an Aussie accent.

Four syllables? Good luck with that. I may have spent thousands of hours playing computer games and watching the same old sitcoms but even I don't have the time to waste on four syllable names. I'll call a gay guy Christopher or Michael if that's how they're introduced 'cause that's only polite, but the second we become friends they're getting called Chris or Mike or mate if they don't like abbrevs. I used to do the same with women, call them babe, but nobody likes that guy anymore.

"Everyone calls me Ella though" she says with the tiniest of lip twitches. I give myself an internal high five for both the allowed shortening of her name and my remembering to remember her as Ella Fitzgerald.

“A pleasure to meet you Ella” I say, managing to cram both a hello and the info that I'm from the home counties into a mere eight syllables. She looks up from the bench and gives me the eye-contact such a formal greeting demands. The combination of shyness and beauty is jarring. An Aussie accent but with dark skin so I'm thinking Indian migrant. Her eyes are a startling shade of green, like that blue liquid that's always getting poured on sanitary towels only then seen through a layer of the yellow jelly you find in budget pork pies. And there's a deep sadness in them, the kind that makes me cringe at the cliché yet still want to reach out and cure.

I tear myself away and thank the lords of fuck that I'm sitting between the women and not facing them 'cause then I'd start over-thinking the length of my stares and spend our convos like I've got two lazy eyes. As soon as my 'fortunateness' occurs to me my physical self rebels, my body temperature jumping from suntan to sunburn. First impressions I tell myself, play it cool Sam. Relaxed, friendly and quip whilst the quippings good; but telling yourself that is like telling your enemy your biggest weakness. I feel my face flush red and my hands and forehead acquire an unwanted layer of lubricant. Damn my body. Whenever I want my thoughts and feelings hidden the most my mutinous skin shell betrays me. Maybe it's a sign of rebellion, a protest over the regular poisoning it's forced to endure from excessive drink, drugs and doner kebabs. Maybe tomorrow I'll start meeting it halfway; go for a morning run, swap the doners for chicken - no pitta.

Yeah right, that's basically a chicken salad. What a self-deluding Idiot I am. Starting sentences with 'starting tomorrow' is like starting one with 'not being racist but'. One NYE I remember telling myself that, starting tomorrow I'll stop starting sentences with starting tomorrow. How stupid can a smart person be? Procrastination is the bunker behind which covers the lazy, scared and self-delusional.

“Good sleep?” asks Conor, saving me from my torturous thoughts.

“Yeah. I dreamt about a never-ending cheesecake.”

“Eh, I was just being polite. I don't want to hear about your dreams, no one does.” He points to the freshly erected tower and the bottles that surround it. “The game's tequila Jenga. You knock down the tower, you down your drink.”

The table's covered in label-less bottles that contain a product that no one wanted credit for. I've never been a fan of drinking games. To someone who's straddling the age groups, my status of 'social drinker' is soon to go the way of my twenties and be replaced with the title of 'unsociable alcoholic'. I don't get how drinking can be seen as a punishment. The rules are set up in such a way to encourage losing which negates the point of the game for me, and if you don't want to drink and feel forced to by other people's rules, well that's just a bit too rapey for my liking.

I sniff the contents of one of the bottles. It smells like a homeless man that got in a transporter with a block of cheese, emerged the other side as a hideous hybrid then drowned himself in a vat of vodka. I take a hearty swig and immediately lose some of the focus in my left eye. “Urr, my left eye's gone all fuzzy.”

“That's free tequila for ya brah” says one of the tanned yanks. His name's Brent or Brick or Tank or something. He turns to high-five his similarly muscled and good looking friend whose name is an English place name. Windsor I think, possibly Bognor or Slough. I want to hate them for their good looks and cool demeanour but the fact that they're looking at me with interest and not the girls either side makes it hard.

“I'm bloody starving” I say in an effort to hide by distress, which coming from the mouth of a white guy usually means I've not eaten in three hours. In terms of acceptable and understood exaggerations it's up there with saying 'I'm depressed' after your randomly chosen football team's lost a match, your 'depression' a devastating and long-term illness you manage to overcome by going home, eating a pizza and moaning to anyone who'll listen that you'll have to settle for the second tier of European football.

“There's some taco places round the corner that are very nice” says.. Deep Fat..Freja. “I'll take you if you want?” My heart starts racing. Calm down Sam, it's a friendly gesture not an invitation to a dogging hot-spot. The plan proposal solidifies and I do my British duties by asking who wants what.

Literally 'armed' with an order list written in ink I hope is sweat-proof I join Freja at the gate. From there I notice a guy in the corner watching me from his hammock, his seven foot frame and complete lack of movement sending shivers down my spine. What sort of sick, baby-killing psycho can resist swinging in a hammock?

“Who's that guy?” I ask Freja. She shrugs. “Not spoken to him. He's been here a few days though. Goes to bed early. I think he has private room.”

Yesterday I was sure that'd be me; the friendless freak skulking in the shadows to hide his failure to make any mates. I walk over and ask him if he wants anything from the shops. He cringes back from my presence then stutters a no thank you with a slight west country twang. I know he really means yes and he's stuck in English manner mode because who doesn't want an authentic Mexican taco? Even if you'd just eaten you'd want one for later. Even vegans would eat a taco if they thought the pig involved was an evil, piglet-eating cannibal. Mmm. Imagine how good that would taste? Pork-reared pork. Fuck it, I'm bringing him one back anyway. If I pad out the group with anxious outcasts then maybe I can be Lord of the Freaks when the wheat says goodbye to the weirdos.

I rejoin Freja at the gate and we take a slow walk up a shady street, the low willowy trees blocking the light from the street-lamps and upping the trip risk by a factor of ten. We shoot the superficial shit, the getting to know you game show intro: what's your name and where are you from, where are you going and where have you been, who is your daddy and what does he do. I let her do the talking, nodding along as I revel in her natural warmth, her friendly glow, her odd tendency to focus on positives.

She tells me she's travelling for a year before going home to take advantage of Sweden's free education. I ask her what she wants to do to which she answers 'that's what I'm here to find out' which is either cheesy or sweet. I'm feeling generous, let thou be sweet. I give her back some of

the same - one last adventure before settling down (implying previous adventures but she'll never know), meet new people (scrape the bottom of the sexual barrel), sample some of Latin America's finest hallucinogens, you know, the usual stuff. Light and fluffy's the name of the game when dealing with the newly acquainted. A casual workmate asks how your weekend went you say not bad, you say okay. You don't say you spent the entire weekend stoned, browsing online take-out menus and choosing from each your fantasy meal. You save that kind of weird shit for close friends and anonymous blogs. Keep it easy, light and breezy, nothing sad or deep or cheesy. Apart from that rhyme. That cheese can stand.

After a few minutes of amiable ambling we reach a fork in the road. Away to the right is the area's main shopping street. A KFC and Burger King stand as gatekeepers, two giants of the bread-meat-bread industry, jealous enemies consumed with hate or perhaps cross-species lovers, destined to forever be parted by society's taboos and a busy main road. Their fluorescent lights fall on the prancing figure of a man in a full-body fat suit. The suit's in the style of a construction worker: hi-vis jacket, yellow hard-hat, handlebar moustache, all the classics of the builder outfit only with a fat guy gut and the dancing skills of an elderly leprechaun, one that's lost both his feet to diabetes from eating too many Lucky Charms. The tubby tradesman approaches a passing couple and hands them a leaflet. He or she must be roasting in there, jiggling about all day trying to flog power tools or structurally reinforced stepladders.

“What's that guy selling, medicine for heatstroke?”

“Viagra.”

We head left, away from the high street and down an alley that opens out onto a large, white-tiled area with a play-park, stage and benches on one side and a row of food kiosks on the other.

“Viagra?”

“Ya.”

“So what's with the builder costume then? Is he like, the mascot of a local pharmacy or something?”

“Ya.”

“Oh.”

We drift towards the taco stand with the snazziest sign. The slanted roof displays a mural, a cartoon taco with a screaming mouth and eyes bulging in fear at the knowledge that its entrails could burst out its sides at any moment. Its white gloved Mickey Mouse hands are held up in a half-hearted defensive gesture, like he knows his entire life-cycle ends in being dissolved in stomach acid but are held up anyway in a futile request for clemency. The stall also happens to be the only place with a queue which I'm hoping means fresher food but really, the best I can hope for is maybe a 5% drop in the chances of diarrhoea.

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