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Mustn't Grumble

Joe Bennett

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Going, Oh My God, Home

The smoking lounge at Singapore airport is a rooftop balcony of sunflowers. It's 8 p.m. and eighty degrees. The air smells of carbolic, as if the whole island had been recently disinfected. The hot wind bends the sunflowers close to the point of snapping. Around the beds there's a line of yellow paint beyond which you are not allowed to smoke, presumably for fear of poisoning the flowers.

I am there for three hours. I spend most of them smoking, drinking beer and half-heartedly engaged in conversation with a Scot and a Cornishman. They have both worked on oil rigs in the North Sea. Killing time, they try to find a mutual acquaintance.

'Do you ken that sparkie, tall guy?' asks the Scot. 'We used to call him Streak of Piss.'

The Cornishman does not ken Streak of Piss.

Undeterred, the Scot lists several other people that he kens, but the Cornishman kens none of them. Nor, remarkably, does the Scot ken any of the guys the Cornishman kens.

The Cornishman tires of the game and asks me what I'm going home for. When I tell him that I am going to hitch around England, he cocks his head. 'You'll be lucky,' he says. 'How long since you've been back?'

'A year or two.'

'The place has changed, mate. It's gone paranoid. And you're not exactly a dolly bird, are you?'

He isn't the first person to suggest that hitching will be hard. Last week in Christchurch I went to buy the trousers I am wearing now, a pair of the multiply zipped and pocketed things that are in fashion with the young. They are the nearest

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contemporary equivalent to the knee-pocketed army-surplus trousers that I habitually used to hitch in.

The shop assistant was young and Irish. When I told him what I wanted the trousers for, he suggested I bought something warmer.

'Why's that?'

'You're going to be standing by the road for one hell of a long time,' he said and he laughed, and I laughed with him.

It is early April, just the time of year that Morton set off on his travels. But amid the tropical heat of a Singapore night, it is Browning who rings in my head, and in particular his line about the elm-tree bole in tiny leaf. I am not sure that I can identify an elm tree. I am not even sure that any elm trees remain after the Dutch disease. But I can picture with a twang of nostalgia those tiny and tender elm leaves, translucent as baby skin, sprouting, somehow, from the tree's barked and bulbous base.

The plane is crammed, the doors are shut, the safety video plays and nothing happens. We just sit on the tarmac. The cabin grows slowly warmer. People fan themselves with newspapers and menus, looking around, seeking a reason for the delay, for the heat. The sense of frustration turns to a sense of suppressed alarm at the rising temperature. People sit like nervous antelope, sniffing danger, alert, instinctual. The great god of technology seems to be faltering. Something is wrong with this ship of the sky.

'What the fuck's going on?' asks a loud Scottish voice. It's the oil engineer. He's a couple of rows behind me. A stewardess scuttles to his seat, leans over to him, talks inaudibly, as if to an errant child.

The pilot comes on over the public-address system. But that too seems faulty. It crackles between loud and low. And his Asian English is hard to interpret. The cabin has become seriously warm. My forehead bristles with sweat. A baby wails. The wail cuts through the cabin like a saw. The noise is almost enough to provoke anger. I consciously keep myself in check, being English, being proper. But it would take only a couple more degrees of temperature, a couple more baby wails, to crack the reserve that still governs the cabin, to set people talking to unknown neighbours. And from there it would not be far to revolt, to people rising from their seats and insisting on being released from this sealed metal tube. Civilization is on the point of crumbling. Instinct is regaining the supremacy that it has held for most of the brief history of our species. I can feel in myself exactly the sentiments that are springing in every heart and mind on the plane, regardless of race or language. Seated in the most advanced product of human reason, we are regressing swiftly to something entirely unreasonable, something atavistic, and we are all doing so at the same time at the same rate. You can see the faces of the stewardesses battling it too, their selves

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struggling with their training. It would take only one dramatic event, a whiff of smoke, say, to trigger panic.

A sudden whirr and the air-conditioning kicks back in. Within a minute the temperature is comfortable. The aircraft gives a tiny lurch and starts to move. And faith in technology instantly regains sway. The beast that was becoming an oven is now going to hoist us into air too thin to breathe and carry us at more than half the speed of sound for several thousand miles and provide for all our needs, and we are comfortable with that. We trust.

The plane takes off. We settle down to eat and watch and breathe and wait, in limboland. I reflect that when my foot next touches soil, it will be in England, my native lump of rock. I feel a little fizz of zest. For though I have lived abroad for all but two of the last twenty-five years, I remain English and will die English. And I am happy with that. In a primal way over which I have no control, I still love the place.

Few airport names are romantic, but fewer still are as unromantic as Heathrow. Or as inaccurate. The only rows are of rental cars, and if ever there was a heath it's buried now beneath a monstrous acreage of concrete. Artificially lit in the darkness before dawn, the concrete is busy with low-cabbed vehicles.

As I pass through the rigmarole of disembarkation, luggage collection, customs and immigration queuing, I recognize the tone of everything. The ceilings are lower than in other airports, the porters grudging, the air-conditioning in the corridors less efficient, the noise greater, the officials more bored, less smiling. The English have never done this international stuff well. The Americans do, the newly ambitious tiger nations do, but the English manage to infect the whole with an air of shabbiness, of slight grudge. I don't mind. It is how it is.

Although the country is supposed to be alert for terrorists I whisk through immigration, my purple European passport getting only the briefest glance from an official in a turban with a face like ravaged sandstone. It is six in the morning.

The Arrivals Hall at Terminal 3 is too warm and absurdly busy. We travellers emerge, still fogged with sleep or sleeplessness, into an identity parade. Beyond the barriers the greeters stand three deep, scanning us in search of the one familiar face, dismissing the dishevelled rest.

A girl is waving to me. She is wearing a strangely outmoded cloth coat, like a doll's coat, or something from the fifties. I had not expected her to be there. She is a cub journalist on one of the free newspapers that you find in sodden dispensers about central London, a publication aimed at ex-pat Kiwis and Australians. She emailed me last week, wanting to interview me about a book of mine. I told her that, as it happened, I was about to come to England. But, I added, I would not be spending time in London, nor could I promise to be anywhere at any particular time except Heathrow at six on this Wednesday morning. I thought that would put her off.

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She is called Maike. I tell her I must smoke and we go outside to where the coaches park. The air is thick with diesel. The sky is lightening from black to slate grey and the pavement is slippery with what is not quite rain, just a pervasive damp. There are no elm-tree boles. Only traffic and admin buildings and a multi-storey car park and the strained faces of travellers and the flat faces of people going to work too early in the morning.

I grind my butt out with a hundred others by a bin and we go back inside. On the cafe table beside me there's a copy of the Sun. While Maike fetches coffee I turn to page three. Breasts still, pert, primped and smiling just as they were when I lived here a quarter of a century ago. I compute that in the years I've been away, about 9,000 young women have rolled up their T-shirts for the Sun. That's 18,000 breasts. The ones I saw in my youth will be sagging now, unphotographed.

Across the way a newsagent's is stacked high with the morning papers, all of them national, all of them aimed to gratify a particular reader. It's the caste system in print. To carry a newspaper under your arm in this country is to wear a badge. I was brought up with the Telegraph.

Maike asks when I am setting off and I say now, right now, and she says she'll come too. She wants to take a photo of me hitching.

You can't leave Heathrow on foot. The only exit is through the tunnel and that tunnel is forbidden to pedestrians. Maike and I board a bus at random.

'We just want to get out of Heathrow,' I say to the driver in his cage of plastic.

'You and everyone else,' he says and charges us nothing and I am absurdly pleased. With patient skill he rumbles the huge double-decker through the metropolis of traffic and round the too-small roundabouts and through the pedestrian-free tunnel. Maike and I get off at the first stop beyond the droop-nosed Concorde, which has been guarding Heathrow for as long as I've been catching planes, presumably because Britain hasn't invented anything to replace it, apart from, perhaps, the Dyson vacuum cleaner. Opposite us stands the slab-sided Holiday Inn. It would be hard to imagine anything looking less like a holiday. Or, indeed, like an inn.

Planes take off every few minutes and disappear into the mattress of cloud. That cloud compresses the air and muffles the world. We walk west, past a terrace of wet houses with plastic double glazing screwed over every window frame. There's a dead pram in the front yard of one and a pink bed. We pass a scrappy forgotten field, the last remnant perhaps of Heathrow's heath. I stop to study the remains of a hedge. It's a traffic-soiled straggle, a grim parody of the hedges that Morton motored between in 1926, or indeed of the hedges that lined the lanes of Sussex during my childhood. But beneath the grime is the vegetation that I grew up with, that I can name. Here is alder, holly, a stunted horse chestnut, hawthorn, nettles, cow-parsley and the browned stems of last year's thistles. In defiance of the gloom and the dirt and the incessant traffic, the buds on the horse chestnut have burst to expose intimate fronds of leaf like tiny tongues, of a green so fresh it aches.

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The road is unhitchable. There's ample traffic, but for one thing the cars are travelling too fast, and for another they are forbidden to stop. The road is officially a clearway, the illegality of stopping stressed by fierce red lines beside the kerb. Here you have no choice but to move. I tell Maike that we may have a little walk ahead.

'A little walk?'

'A longish walk.'

I hoist my pack to my shoulders and we're away. An old iron sign says Bath Road. It is too small and low for these speeding drivers to notice. Its modern equivalent is a hundred square feet of post-mounted metal, offering drivers the choice of the M25 or Slough. The road is straight and daunting and we are the sole pedestrians, obvious aliens in vehicle-land.

A mile or so along the road I stop at a rutted driveway leading down to a shop. 'Palms, reptiles, birds and accessories,' says a hoarding at the top of the drive.

'This'll do,' I say.

It won't do. I know it won't do. But though Maike is sweet and good company, I am keen to be shot of her. I want to be alone.

Maike takes a photo of me with my thumb hopelessly extended in the exhaust-rich air, wishes me luck and heads back towards Heathrow. I wait till she is out of sight, then pick up my bag and head into England, on foot and on my own.

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