

‘Brisbane to Perth? That’s a bladdy long way, mate.’

– *Almost every Aussie I spoke to, in Oz, in 2007*

‘Thirty years? That’s a bladdy long time, mate.’

– *Ditto*

‘In the midst of all the constraints of a penal colony, the native-born had developed for themselves a sense of *physical* liberty and kinship with the landscape – like Australians in the 1950s, accepting all manner of censorship, Grundyism and excess police power, but feeling like the freest people on earth because they could go surfing at lunch-time.’

– *Robert Hughes, The Fatal Shore, Vintage, 2003*

DISCLAIMER: This book is not a work of fiction, but the reader is advised not to assume that every event recounted herein took place entirely within the confines of the real world.

GOING

THEN

As soon as the plane levels out the boy's nose explodes. Something gives in the tubes of his face, he feels a slight rupture, and twin crimson rivers leap out onto his shirt.

It's July 4th, 1975. BA flight 940 takes off from Heathrow Terminal 3, heading for Brisbane, Australia, with refuelling stops at Doha and Singapore. It's going to take an age. Everything the boy knows – school, city, friends – is receding into a smudge far below his seat, 24D.

There is a fuss around the boy. His mother and father are tilting his head back and holding tissues to his face. A stewardess is helping. The boy's brother (elder) and sister (younger) are looking at him over the seatbacks in front.

–Is he okay?, the mother asks.

–He'll be fine, the stewardess says. –Sudden change in

pressure, that's all. Happens all the time. Once his body adjusts the bleeding will stop.

But they're worried because they'd been due to fly four days previously but the boy had fallen ill and somehow they'd found a doctor at the airport and he'd ordered them to bump the flight and book a hotel and let the boy sweat it out for a couple of days in bed and that's what they'd done. Emigration – a big step, the biggest. To the other side of the planet. And the first moment of the divorce from the motherland is announced in lots and lots of blood.

NOW

Feel like utter shite. Hate flying when ill, drunk, hungover, and this was gunner be a crippler, twelve hours, horrible. Manchester–Singapore, straight through, with these sniffles and snots and aching kidneys and headache and sore throat and just general bleeuurgh-ness. Break out the nicotine gum. Twelve fucking hours.

–Wasn't like this when we flew last time, was it? Own telly and everything.

–There was just one big screen, remember it? At the bulkhead. D'you remember what films they showed?

–No. I remember coming back, it was *The Deep*, but not when we were going.

–Twelve fucking hours, tho. Hate long haul flights, I do.

–Well, it's either this or four weeks on a boat.

I watch three episodes of *Extras*. *Zodiac*, which convincingly dates itself in the early seventies when one of the characters boards a plane and is told that smoking is only

allowed on the back six rows. Grumbling. *Flags of Iwo Jima*. An episode of a series called *Decadence: The Meaninglessness of Modern Life*, as it is particularly experienced in Australia, offering such statistics as ‘Aussies work more than the super-affluent Germans’, and ‘80% of Australians want to make a radical change to their lives’. A pundit talks about the ‘democratisation of luxury’; how, today, you don’t have to be rich to own Louis Vuitton or drive a BMW. Perhaps not rich, no, but you can’t be poor, either. The programme attempts to air a discussion about the hollowness of manufactured identity and the voice-over states that ‘the religion most Americans are experiencing is consumption... The mall is a cathedral to consumption, and we ape this in Australia’.

Something to look forward to there, then.

Bored to fucking tears. Not even halfway through. When’s food coming?

THEN

The bleeding stops. The boy is told to sit with his head tilted back for a few minutes and this he does, feeling the scabs forming in his nostrils. The captain announces that food will be served shortly so those who smoke light up a pre-prandial cigarette. The plane flies through night-time and the boy doesn’t know whether he is tired or not. It’s night-time outside, but he’s about to eat his tea. It’s July, and back on the ground he’d still be playing out, on his bike, with friends and a football, in his old life. The plane has become like a house in the sky, a long narrow house shared with many others. A new place for him to live in.

Food comes; steak with tomatoes. Buttered vegetables. Croquette potatoes and fruit syllabub.

The boy finds a Spike Milligan radio show on his headset and listens to it several times over. He hears a joke that he doesn't, then, understand, but which will for some reason remain with him for the rest of his life:

*In the morning, there was a heavy dew on the grass.
He'd been thrown out of the synagogue for swearing.*

Somewhere over India he falls asleep. Wakes up with a lurch as the plane plummets through an air-pocket and looks around at the adults' terrified faces and listens to the captain's apologetic and reassuring tones over the Tannoy and falls asleep again.

NOW

All you do is sit on your arse and watch telly so why's it so tiring? Boring, too. Stupefyingly boring. Reading Robert Hughes's *Fatal Shore* and fascinated by it but the lack of visual stimulus batters the brain flat. Pancakes the brain. Through the window there is only blackness, soon to become daylight again when we cross over into another time zone. No trees or clouds or cars to see. All control over your own actions removed from you. Stale air that smells of farts. A steward wandering the aisles dispensing things is a cause for celebration; the hot towel is miraculous. Anything to break this monotony. When I get my Comfort Kit I'm almost weeping with gratitude.

An orange steward with a steely-grey quiff takes food orders. I look at the menu: Green leaf salad with bocconcini

and balsamic dressing, then a choice of chicken in white wine and prosciutto with polenta and greens or Greek style braised lamb with new potatoes and beans, followed by cheese and crackers and ice-cream. I'm excited. I'm bored and hungry and anyway I quite like airplane food; I like the space-management the eating of it requires, the little pots and packets. And sooner a broken bone, sooner botulism, than boredom.

I remember reading about a plan to cut travel-time to Oz to four hours or so; the aircraft would fly straight up, hover in the stratosphere while the planet turns, then re-descend once Oz was beneath it. Sounds a good idea. I last did this journey three decades ago and it takes the same amount of time now as it did then. Geologically slow, it seems. So bored I am. By the time we land the continents will have fused again. There'll be new mountain ranges, volcanoes and glaciers. Deserts where there were once seas.

What the fuck's bocconcini?

THEN

-How long will we be here for, dad?

-Few hours.

-Why?

-Because they have to wind up the elastic band. The propellers in the engines are attached to a great big elastic band and they twist it up dead tight and let it go and that makes the plane move. When the elastic band's untwisted itself the plane stops moving so they have to stop and wind it up again.

-Do we have to stay on the plane?

-No, we can go into the airport.

The heat is like a fist. It punches the boy's breath from his lungs. He's never felt heat like this before and it frightens him a little; he feels trapped, oppressed. Breathing is difficult. Sweat pours. He sees palm trees. For the first time he feels a dizzying distance from what he knows but he's with his mum and dad and they'll keep him safe, they know what to do. On the tarmac, between the plane and the terminal building, he looks up at the stars and doesn't recognise them. They have an unfamiliar pattern.

–Bloody hell. Look at the muck.

The boy's dad puts a finger to a drinks machine and that finger sinks up to the knuckle in greasy dust.

–Look at that.

The boy looks up at his mother's face. She looks worried. Should he be worried too?

NOW

Christ – it fucking *gleams*.

8 a.m. Singapore time but midnight in my head and body. I'm confused and doddering and my eyes feel sandy. Singapore, tho; how it's changed – the airport building is all marble and glittering glass and tinkling water features, all of it scrubbed and shining and spotless. In the concourse, heading towards baggage reclaim, my brother elbows me and nods towards a beautiful woman pulling a heavy suitcase behind her as she might a recalcitrant dog. She has tumbling auburn hair, she's dressed all in black with one leg of her trousers rolled up to the knee, flip-flops on her feet.

–Think there's more like her in Singapore?

–I’m staying if there is.

I follow the signs for the smoking area. I’d heard terrible tales of the dictatorially over-legislated social climate of Singapore, that smoking was completely outlawed, that chewing gum was a punishable offence, but the little lit-up cigarette next to the green arrow was a good sign. I go up some stairs, through some doors and *OOO* – I’m outside. I remember this heat, this humidity, the brutal and instant impact of it. It comes back to me in a flash. The hot and wet towel yanked tight around the face, the tautening of the chest, the immediate trickle of sweat down the back. Nowhere else swelters under such heat. Southern Spain in a heatwave, central Africa, they’re both a bit nippy compared to this.

I sit down by a lush green fern and roll a cigarette. The stone of the bench burns through my already sodden jeans and scalds my arse. I’m so tired. I put the cigarette in my mouth and try to light it but it’s already soggy and useless and I throw it away and wipe my palms on my shirt and roll another and this one works. Inhale. Sigh. The *relief*, again.

THEN

In a souvenir shop the boy looks at a small toy bull, made with the fur of a real animal possibly, quite a realistic depiction with the flared nostrils and the horns and the dynamically-poised legs as if arrested in mid-charge. About the size of a kitten it is. The boy picks it up and instantly at his shoulder is a dark lady with metal in her face, rings and jewels, and a colourful cloak that covers her entirely except for her lean face all teeth and eyes:

-You love him? You wish to buy him?

The boy quickly replaces the bull and runs away. This place is too hot and the people are scary and everything he knows apart from his immediate family has gone away, has been left far behind.

NOW

Aircon like a cellular massage. Every atom coolly caressed. Every inch of skin sings. I speak to the cabbie:

-Is it always this hot, mate? All year round, like?

-Yes yes.

-Don't you have a winter?

-Yes yes.

-What's that like?

-This, but rain. All winter rain rain but every day hot hot.

We drive through traffic and tall buildings and palm trees into Chinatown. Street-stalls selling food, I don't know what, all tubs of hot oil and flashing cleavers. Pull up outside our hotel and pay the driver.

-How much is that in pounds?

My brother works it out. -About twenty quid.

-God that's cheap. Cab from Heathrow into London and you'll pay four times that.

The few feet from cab door to hotel foyer is a Saharan yomp but the foyer is cool again. The heat in this place is unbelievable, a physical assault. I feel almost affronted by it.

The lady behind the desk is sweetly apologetic:

-Ah, very sorry but rooms not ready yet.

Ah shite. -Any idea how long they'll be?

–Half past one.

–Half *one*? But it's only half ten!

She smiles and shrugs. Her smile is very pretty and she seems sweet-natured but all I want to do is sleep.

–We're just off the plane. Twelve hours. We're exhausted.

–We wait for linen but I'll try hurry them. Please; you get coffee in bar. We bring it.

I'm so tired I can hardly move. My brother's eyes are bright red. He looks like he's suffering very badly from hay fever.

We sit on soft couches in the bar. Lean against our bags. Ashtrays on the table, I notice. Singapore, it seems, is more relaxed than Britain, in certain matters. I want to get out and explore it. But I'm so, so tired. Coffee comes. I drink it. Wait. So tired my face slides off the skull and slithers down my chest to puddle up snoring in my lap.

THEN

Look; it's the Glitter Band.

Some men in platform boots and lurid spangly jumpsuits totter past the cafeteria. Big sideburns. They're laughing loudly and talking loudly and apparently enjoying the attention. Their lead singer isn't with them but thirty years later he'll make the news in, to say the least, an unsavoury fashion and the man that the boy will then be will flashback to this moment in Singapore airport when he was drinking orangeade and watching agog the sparkly men stilting by.

–Must be on some kind of world tour.

Clump, clump and shout and laugh away.

The boy's brother is leafing through some information he'd

been sent, on request, from the Australian embassy in London concerning Oz politics and aspects of culture. The boy looks at it but it doesn't make much sense:

LIBERAL Sir Charles Court

LABOR Mr. Colin Jamieson

COUNTRY Mr. R.C. Old

The country is called Mr. Old? And these are foreign names? Names from the other side of the world? There's a Jamieson in the boy's class at school, a David Jamieson. Or there *was*. That school doesn't exist for the boy anymore.

-Dad, will there be tigers and things?

-In Australia?

-Bears and things?

-No, says the mother. -But there'll be poisonous spiders and snakes. So you've got to be very careful.

-In the house, even?

-Maybe.

-Will there be sharks in the sea?

-Yes. So you've got to be careful there, too.

A group of black giraffes glides gracefully past. One of them catches the staring family's collective eye and winks.

-It's the Harlem Globetrotters, says the dad. -Bloody hell.

They approach. They're very, very tall and they tower over the boy like trees and when they grin, and they *are* grinning, their teeth are very white. They speak to the family in deep voices and accents that amaze and one of them tries to engage the boy's little sister in conversation but she just stares with big and astonished eyes. A basketball rolls across high shoulders and spins on long fingers. They laugh a lot and make

the family laugh a lot too. It's like magic, the boy thinks. These are people from a magic land and they can do magic things.

At some point, the boy falls asleep against his mother. He is woken up gently at their call for boarding and is steered in a trance onto another plane and he falls asleep again but wakes up when it takes off and he can see from the window the many lights, a sea of light, of the magic land that he's leaving. Where famous people live and miniature bulls and black giraffes who do miraculous things. One day he'll return to that land.

NOW

Oh Christ thank *fuck* for that.

Rooms ready. Linen found. Porter takes our rucksacks and we follow him wordlessly into the lift and down a plush corridor. When we try to speak it's like this:

-Ng?

-Ngh.

Jetlag has robbed our vowels. Or jtlg. Tony goes into his room, manages to croak: -Bar. Few hours.

-Ngh.

I go into mine. Big bed. Sleeeeeep. Wake up thinking: Singapore Sling. I've *got* to have a Singapore Sling.

Up, shower, shite, shave, fag on the baking balcony where I deposit a tiny fragile cylinder of ash on the inch-wide railing (which I will find still there the next morning, so stagnant and unmoving is the air in this place). Back inside, fill the sink with cold water and plunge my face in it for a count of twenty then do it again.

I descend to the bar on springs. Sleep and a shower and

I'm a mustang. The first Sling tastes just as I imagined it would, like a lovely bellow of abandon, so I have several more then we hit Food Alley and eat the best sticky ribs I've ever had and then wander down to the riverfront, neon a crackle way up there in the haze, spotless city, glittering and a gleam, the humidity something you have to wade through, dashing into shopping centres for the relief of aircon and bars to stand and sweat directly beneath the whopping rotors of the fans. The riverside area is all tempting dark bars and hawkers for restaurants every two yards, fried crab good good? Chilli shrimp? Salt-and-pepper squid, very fine sir? I drink lots of ice-cold beer and more Slings and am enjoying myself very much. I like Singapore a lot. Tony tells me:

-When I was in the marines, there was a kind of myth about Singapore about a building, a brothel like, called Four Floors of Whores. Each floor had a different kind of prostitute, y'know, straight, grannies, ladyboys. Don't know anyone who ever found it but it was kind of a legend.

-Four Floors of Whores?

-Four Floors of Whores, aye. Wonder if it's true. You hear all kinds of stories about these places. There's one about Hong Kong - Backside Alley. You go down a corridor, apparently, a long wooden corridor with holes cut in the walls and arses sticking out of them. You choose your arse and pay and the arse is yours.

-To do what with?

-Anything you like, I suppose. You don't ever see the person, just their arse. Backside Alley.

-This true?

-Well, it's what I heard. You hear all kinds of stories about these places.

I drink more. Early hours, in a taxi, and the cabbie says:

–Where you boys go now? Hotel?

–To sleep, yeh. Knackered. Flew in from London the UK today.

–I take you boys somewhere.

–Where?

–Special place. Very special place.

–What, a club?

–No club, no. Better. Special place – Four Floor Whore!

–What?

–Four Floor Whore!

I turn around in my seat and my brother's laughing.

–D'you hear that? It exists!

The cabbie laughs with us and shouts: –I am fifty-five!

We go back and sleep. My sleep is deep and dreamless. Up, shower, coffee, wander, Buddhist temple, cab to Raffles Hotel for the lunch buffet. Another Singapore legend; I'd heard a lot about it. Travellers' tales. Always wanted to try it. By all accounts, the Raffles lunch buffet is spectacular. It's named after Sir Stamford Raffles, who founded Singapore in 1819, and it hosted its first guest in 1887 when, owned by the Sarkies brothers from America, it was 'basically a commodious bungalow', to quote William Warren's *Raffles Remembered*. It was extended in 1890, with the opening of the Suez Canal. Somerset Maugham visited, as did Noel Coward, Charlie Chaplin, other luminaries. Occupied by the Japanese during the Second World War but re-opened for business in 1946. The Singapore Sling was, apparently, invented in the Long Bar, probably in 1915, by a Hainanese bartender called Ngiam Tong Boon, whose adept hand I'd like to warmly shake. The hotel is all balconies and fragrant courtyards and grand

ballrooms and marble balustrades and tinkling water features and by Christ it's posh. Sepia photographs show famous personages and colonial types in white suits and pith helmets and handlebar moustaches. How did they stand this heat, dressed like that? Much dabbling of empinkened brows with silken handkerchiefs went on, I imagine. Much spluttering too, no doubt. Tight white gaberdine buttoned up snug to the extravagantly bewhiskered thrapple in 80% humidity. I can almost hear the harrumphing. I say, Carstairs! What is it, Carruthers? Tell Gunga Din to fetch another gin, there's a good chap.

Forty shops in the arcade. Souvenirs and collectibles and gourmet food, that type of thing. I buy a notebook whose pages are watermarked with a stylised drawing of a louche bespatted fellow holding a cocktail glass with the words 'RAFFLES HOTEL – THE ONLY PLACE TO ENJOY A SINGAPORE SLING' beneath. And the buffet, God, the buffet... you pay your fifty-two dollars – about twenty quid – and are ushered into a cavernous room cooled by fans and assailed by smells and colours and the dash of diners and cooks. It's incredible. You pick up a plate and wander and fill it, eat, wander and re-fill, wander and re-fill, until you're a balloon. Half lobsters. Oysters and writhing sushi. Roast duck and kimchi. Roast lamb and spuds, beef stew, carrots, green beans, mashed potato and gravy for those who want to do a rainy British Sunday in the tropics. Curried pumpkin soup, pork loin, crab claws, ratatouille and goat's cheese pasta, smoked salmon, prawns, braised lamb shank, twenty different kinds of bread, runny and socky French cheeses. Literally hundreds of dishes, and you can try them all, as often as you want, for your initial plate fee, for as long as your guts hold

out. All you have to buy is the drinks. And the pud's! Tiny little artworks of chocolate and sponge and candied fruit and laceworked spun sugar. Large spikey fruits and odd nuts I don't recognise. It's brilliant. It's tremendous. It's wonderful. Apparently a tiger was shot beneath the pool table in 1902; he'd probably come in for the buffet. I could stay here for ever.

I am loving Singapore. That food and the heat insisted on a siesta, and sliming heavily back to the hotel I realised that my blue shirt was now zebra-striped with streaks of dried salt. From the sweat. A new one was needed, but the sizes were designed for Asian morphology, so even the XXL sizes equated to a British M; that is, for me, nipple-outliningly tight. I buttoned one up in the department-store changing-room and looked at myself in the mirror and could see, distressingly delineated, everything I'd just eaten at Raffles. Deeply unpleasant. I take it off and return it to the shop-girl.

-Too small still, I say. -Need big, big! Like a tent!

I find one, eventually, a short-sleeved billowing green thing which also, by that evening, sports foully fancy white stripes. Had it been black, I'd be looking like a piano keyboard. That night we end up in Little India, dirty and hectic and frantic and cheap and brilliant, worlds away from the skyscrapers and malls of the city centre. In the Prince o' Wales bar, the Cwrw Felinfoel *y ddraig goch* is up on the wall. The barmaid tells me that her boss is an Aussie of Welsh heritage; 'name Davies, his'. She asks me where I'm from, where I was born: 'Ah, you scouser!' There's a shelf of well-thumbed paperbacks by the door and I scan it and find a copy of my third novel and an anthology containing an extract from my second; next to my name on the contents page, someone had ticked it with biro and written 'YES!'

Singapore gets better and better. I'm loving Singapore. This is going to be a good trip, I think, the food and the booze and the colours and the sounds and revisiting my self thirty years ago, meeting my own ghost, childhood me, on the other side of the planet, those formative years and would I recognise that place or that boy growing up 12,000 miles from his home? Will I know his voice, should I hear him speak? The roots of the neuroses and obsessions that burn in *this* boy, now just past forty, will I see them? And if I do, will I know what they are? Around a booze-bath in Singapore's Little India, beneath a shelf bending with books with my name on some of them, a kind of delirium sets in and the planet contracts and expands as if it's taking deep breaths, as if it's tired, and I grow dizzy with discovery and possibility and every cell seems to hum in anticipation and I make for the riverside and drink still more in the salted haze and go back to the hotel and sleep and I'm liking Singapore very very much and then I get up and look at the ash still there on the railing and then I fly to Brisbane.

AUSTRALIA: BRISBANE

THEN

The ground isn't moving right. All those hours in the sky and the solid ground now feels to the boy like water, wobbling and unsteady, unable to be trusted. More heat, close and wet and heavy on his face. He's gone beyond tiredness, and confusion; it's as if all will and volition has left him and he is allowing himself to be steered and directed, his only response obedient indifference. This is Australia. He's in Oz. He drifts through the airport with his family and picks up luggage and gets into a minibus that will take him to the Immigration Hostel. On the bus, he meets a friendly, bearded Scottish biker called Stuart, and a large, round, pink man called Tudor George who bangs his head getting into the van and yells: 'Oo!' The boy's mother speaks to Tudor. Tells him that she doesn't feel as if she's in Australia and Tudor agrees: