

Ben considers taking a bus

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Ben was relieved to discover that what had seemed like an S-shaped brown stain on the sleeve of his dry-cleaned jacket was in fact a particle that defied definition and would forever remain undefined as he quickly plucked it, rolled it into a miniscule ball between thumb and index finger, and let it fall into the confined space between his seat and the passenger in front of him.

Ben looked through the window (he had a window seat) and tried to summon up the sensation that usually came with taking off in a plane. A sensation of human greatness. Even the new low emissions propeller planes did it for him, though he resented that once up in the air it was almost impossible to work on them if there was as much as a hint of turbulence. The plane was being towed to the runway. Once in place, its propellers would come to life, the frozen exclamation marks disappearing into invisible vortices Ben hoped would remain that way.

On that day Ben was not able to summon up any sensations of greatness, neither his own nor that of humanity in general. But it was hardly surprising, given the circumstances.

What he did feel, once the plane had reached the runway, had been disconnected from the towtruck and was hurrying to pick up the speed it would need for the final metamorphosis from hurtling gazelle to soaring bird, was that he could die very soon. That momentary sensation never escaped him. And as always, he wondered whether the passenger beside him felt something similar. She, like him, was dressed in the sober hues of serious business, except of course hers was a woman's outfit. Like him she was equipped with a Tablet that she would try to work on if the crags of the uKhahlamba were not venting too much hot air into the lower atmosphere between Durban and Johannesburg.

Ben usually thought of his mild fear of flying not as a sign of cowardice, but intelligence. This connection, between fear and intelligence, usually placated him. But today was different. All he could feel as the plane raced along the runway was

unmitigated fear as its tiny hooves pummelled him from within, from cranium to groin.

He felt mad at himself for going back to Avis to get the reading glasses he had forgotten on the car seat. Had he not done that he would have had time to speak to his doctor, even with the delays at the security control. He had worked the whole thing out whilst sitting in the traffic to King Shaka International. He would have at least fifteen minutes to spare, which he would spend at a coffee shop he knew had a view, through tall sheets of glass, of a well-tended patch of Durban jungle. Framed by strelitzias with leaves like giant spoons he would take out his Tablet and have a video call with his doctor. It had to be a video call. For certain conversations you just had to know the facial expressions of your interlocutor. But no, he had to forget his glasses and then make the second mistake of going back to get them when he could so easily have picked them up when he went to Durban the following week.

In theory he could hold the conversation from the plane, but that was out of the question with an unknown person next to him and God knows how many more within earshot, quite apart from the possibility that they might suddenly be struck by turbulence.

As the plane began its ascent, its underbelly exposed to the perils of nothingness, the image Ben had conjured up of his funeral lingered. His daughter would be there, standing out amongst his conventionally dressed staff and colleagues in one of her locally produced undyed dresses, having made the trip from Cape Town to Jo'burg by train to score carbon points. The tragedy in her mind would be not so much the tragedy of his death, but the tragedy of his life. A sense of tragedy that lends itself to dry-eyed contemplation, not grief. That would be one distinct disadvantage with dying prematurely. He would not get to see his daughter mature, become a bit more forgiving. It was of scant comfort that a plane accident would at least come with a front page feature on the news sites, perhaps even links to personal bios. A car accident, or death through the Dry Plague, would never result in such coverage.

His ex-wife would be at the graveside too, sizing up his friends and colleagues, letting her eyes rest on their daughter,

noting the inescapably strong physical resemblance between deceased father and only child.

Naturally, in cognisance of a respectable ending, neither Dudu One nor Dudu Two would be present.

The serving of breakfast by the uniformed air hostess prompted the usual gyrations as tray tables were unfolded and meals passed over heads. This gave Ben a fresh opportunity to observe his co-passenger. She wore spectacles which, whilst giving a better focus on the world, also lent a certain sharpness to her face that others might benefit from. She had decisive lips that suggested she orchestrated her inhalations and exhalations with much care, even aquatically. She began inspecting her breakfast, dissecting the omelette delicately with a plastic fork, and may have proceeded with a complete inspection had Ben not dropped his package of margarine through the gap between the two tray tables.

The conclusion came quickly, if breathlessly. It would be best to leave the margarine wherever it had fallen. It would be simply too impractical, too intimate, for either to send an arm down into the tunnel below them. This conclusion was possible with almost no words, just a tumble of hands and nods and embarrassed laughs.

Then they really talked.

Ben told the woman that he had a company that implemented WholeU, a system that employees in a company could use not only to enter their working hours, but also the number of times they went to the gym, how often they spent time with their children, whether they were sticking to their diet, and so on. In so doing, it provided employees with additional incentives to organise their lives rationally. Ben was the sole owner of the South Africa licence from the American company. The woman had heard of WholeU, in fact Ben thought he picked up a momentary stop and go in the eyes suggesting there was something she could say about WholeU, but did not. This made Ben inquisitive, made him study his co-passenger for clues.

For a while he enjoyed the gift of forgetting, of forgetting he had a call to make to his doctor.

She was a senior manager in the Department of Public Enterprises, responsible for communications. When she lowered her voice and confided in Ben that it was a tough job

because she had to work with a lot of incompetent people (though she did not explicitly say 'incompetent') Ben felt flattered, almost seduced, by such confidences, such trust. It motivated him to tell the senior manager from Public Enterprises about Errol Leander, his favourite life guru. He would have taken a copy out of his bag had his bag not been sitting in the storage compartment above him. The good thing about Errol Leander, Ben explained, was that he didn't push a particular recipe for achieving your goals. He taught you how to make the recipes yourself. That was the amazing thing about Errol Leander.

'I've read a bit by him. He's good,' she conceded.

Ben savoured a beautiful but slightly eerie silence within him. For a moment the only sound he could hear was the faint humming of the propeller engines on the wing.

They talked about time management and how gratifying it could be to find and employ the right domestic, whether foreign or South African. The senior manager from Public Enterprises had discovered she had a phobia, thanks to her domestic. The domestic, who was Malawian, would, after dusting the bookcase, always reinsert one or two books upside down. The Public Enterprises woman had noticed she could spot which one of the several hundred books was upside down the minute she entered the room and would turn it round instantly, even before she put her keys down.

'I think that qualifies as a phobia!' she said, laughing and making Ben laugh. Even the air hostess offered a lipstick smile as she leant over to pour more coffee.

In a state of absentmindedness Ben accepted the coffee, only realising afterwards that he would not be able to drink it. The size of the bookcase of the woman from Public Enterprises was old-fashioned yet daunting. He wondered what she would think of his miniature collection of mostly Errol Leander books. There was something about Errol Leander that made you want to have him in a real book. For the rest, Ben preferred to keep his reading material on his Tablet.

Ben revealed to the woman from Public Enterprises how content he was with his domestic, who in fact was local. Not only did his domestic cook, she also ate with him and discussed her children and the state of the country's politics

with him. Yes, both breakfast and lunch, Ben explained, and even weekend lunches when there was nothing else on.

'She's like a wife, then,' the Public Enterprises woman remarked.

'Exactly like a wife!' Ben blurted out. Too recklessly, he regretted afterwards, because he picked up a slight chill from the Public Enterprises woman, a possible cringing in the fine eyebrows. He wondered if what he said sounded sordid, perhaps offensive for a feminist, which he began to suspect she was.

If the domestic as a wife comment hadn't ended the conversation, keeping in mind that ninety-nine per cent of airline passenger conversations must in any case die in their infancy, in the three per cent of cases where they are born in the first place, then the turbulence that hit the plane almost at the same time probably would have ended it.

The turbulence reignited the little hooves of fear inside Ben and reminded him he would have to find a spot to make a call as soon as he landed at O R Tambo.

The plane bobbed as if suspended on an elastic band. Ben clutched the undrinkable coffee tightly so that it would not spill. He continued holding on after the turbulence stopped. In his experience, turbulence on the Durban to Jo'burg route had a nasty habit of recommencing with a vengeance.

As he looked out on the untidy patches of cloud partly concealing the brown earth beneath, it struck Ben how one's life can pass from being one's own piece of property to being a distant thing, like a news article one reads and half believes. If he had really been infected by the Dry Plague, despite taking all the normal precautions, then the removal trucks had come and gone already. It was not his life any more.

He tried to imagine calling Dudu Two up, have her recline between the rolls of foamy clouds. Dudu Two, spelt Dudu and then the digit 2 on his keyboard, still impressed him. He might grow tired of her, not see her for a couple of days, or even weeks, but in the end he would always resort to the virtual girlfriend, or VG, he had created five years ago. Ben believed the VG system he subscribed to had to be the best. The way Dudu Two would remember things he had said in the past, things he himself had forgotten, made her almost human, and in so many ways more reliable than women he had met

through the dating sites. In fact, he barely thought of Dudu Two as a reincarnation of Dudu One anymore. Dudu One had been such a long time ago, and no doubt his memories of her had been coloured and distorted by his first replacement attempt, his ex-wife. Dudu Two had gained a momentum all of her own. Some men, especially younger ones, were totally open, or feigned complete honesty, about their VGs. But Ben would remain tight-lipped when they came up in conversation. Bragging about his technical ability to breathe life into his VG seemed like a perfect way of ruining the relationship.

After going through three months of feeling the symptoms creep up on him, first as vague distractions, then as full-blown performances following, sometimes to the letter, the scripts Ben discovered on the medical sites, he eventually told Dudu Two. But it seemed she was not capable of dealing with the matter. Maybe he had left something out when he had initially set her up. Maybe the software was not meant to deal with mortality in the first place. That's when he went to his doctor to get all the proper tests done.

The plane landed at O R Tambo and Ben walked through the slug that attached itself to the plane. The footfalls of the passengers on the metal floor produced a thunderous ring that was perhaps the reason why everyone hurried to get out of the slug and into the terminal building, where the conveyor belts hummed quietly as they did the walking for you. Even those who decided to walk on the conveyor belts, which was probably most people, enjoyed an illusion of effortlessness thanks to the springiness of the rubber beneath them, and the galloping bird effect of having one's body move faster than one's stride.

The illuminated airport ads that Ben passed, of mountains and sea shores from which the country's wine, cheeses, fruit juices and holidays came, seemed not to be directed at him any more. It was as if he had underestimated the immensity of the system whereby people had their turn. They had their start, they then flew, and then their turn was over. At that point the ads no longer watched you. You became invisible to them.

Ben's mouth felt dry. His body had stopped manufacturing saliva, it seemed. In fact, his whole body felt dry. The bits and pieces of his inner machinery ground drily, threatened to stall in a cacophony of loose cogs and wires.

Yet he knew that his ability to pretend was so developed that the drama would remain his own. The shoe shine boys had no idea as they exhorted him to ascend their ridiculous thrones so that they could belabour lost grandeur into his shoes. The woman from Public Enterprises probably saw nothing amiss as she overtook Ben in the concourse. Whether she recognised him from behind or not was not the point. It was normal, even respectful, to keep to oneself at this point. The needs that had existed when they were bunched together thousands of metres above the Earth were there no longer.

Ben exited the inner sanctum of the high security section of the airport and entered the general area. That was another disadvantage with holding the conversation with his doctor in Jo'burg and not Durban. In Durban, he would have enjoyed the convenience of being in the secure area. Here in Jo'burg he would be back in the hubbub of non-passengers. It was not so much the risk that someone might take his bag that bothered him, though with his constituent bits coming apart that was probably a greater risk than usual. It was more the ever-present rowdiness of the general area, and the loss of a few notches of cleanliness, that bothered Ben.

Ben walked past shops and cafes with television screens broadcasting sporting events and occasionally news of how people, people who did not pass through airport secure areas, were protesting about the things they couldn't get from their government or their employer.

He found an almost empty Irish Pub which offered a quiet alcove of varnished wood and dark green seat upholstery. It did not at all have the promise of the Durban jungle behind sheet glass, but it would have to do.

Ben ordered a Rooibos tea, no milk no sugar, from the young waiter, whom Ben observed longer than he would usually observe waiters, as if information he might need lay hidden within the youth. If it did, the waiter yielded nothing. His facade of ignorance was impeccable.

Ben was shocked to see his own hands tremble uncontrollably as they handled the wafer thin Tablet, opened it up before him and touched the right buttons. He could not help noticing how the decor of the pub, even the lighting, conspired to create a lugubriousness centred around him and the screen of his Tablet, which stared up at him like a square eye. The

lingering smell of last night's cigarette smoke only enhanced the effect. The waiter entered the stage with the tea and then left immediately, almost as if sensing the danger, or disease.

Ben sipped down half of the tea in one raising of the cup. The warm liquid seeped into the dry cracks within. He coughed and gave his vocal chords a quick practice run with a subdued 'Uhum!'

He connected through to the medical centre. He was put on hold. He used the wait to quickly pull out a sheet of paper and a pen to take notes, not realising (as he would later) the pointlessness given the ultimate simplicity of the conversation he was going to have.

Eventually his doctor's face appeared on the screen.

'Okay, Ben, let's see here now,' she contemplated as she read through information on her screen that only she could see. Ben observed how below him his tie had begun quivering from the beating of his heart. Why was she fiddling with things on her computer? Surely she knew. Why the pretence, as if he was some fool to be pacified with useless ceremony and delay? Ben felt how he could see something, the final ball of truth at the end of the universe, which, as it turned out, was nothing but a tight kernel of irritation over the pointlessness of almost everything. That's what it all boiled down to.

'Okay, Ben, you can relax. All the tests are negative,' she announced. 'All of them.' More paging through information on her screen. 'So whatever you've got, it's not what you thought you might have. Hmm. Now I think what we need to do is run some different tests so we can get to the bottom of what's happening to you. I'd like to refer you to a specialist. There are any of a number of things that might be wrong.'

When the consultation was over, and Ben had put his Tablet away, he gulped down the remainder of his tea too quickly, burning his throat. He had miscalculated how little time had passed.

He was about to walk away without paying when the expressionless waiter came to life and reminded him. Ben paid him the largest tip he had ever paid. The waiter was at first too stunned to say anything. Then he erupted with joy, waving at Ben disappearing into the crowd, as if they had known each other a lifetime.

Ben took the lift to the Parkade and walked to his car. He unplugged the recharge cable and opened the car door. His car spoke to him. In an American accent. And as a woman.

'Good morning, Ben. Your car motor is fully charged and the recharge cable is disconnected. The auto check reveals that no immediate care of any parts is necessary. You can drive approximately twelve thousand kilometres before your next service. Ben, do you require assistance with directions to your next destination?'

'No,' Ben replied.

He sat in the car, quietly observing the world around him in the subdued light of the Parkade. A firmament of movement sensitive lights along the ceiling showed red when a bay was occupied and green when it was free. Soon his lamp, which he couldn't see because it was immediately above him, would go green. Every now and then he could see a light in the distance change colour as someone came or went.

In the dim light he spotted people who had been on routine trips they would soon not be able to distinguish from others within their murky lakes of travel and airport memories. Then there were people who were making trips, or had made trips, they would not forget. Youngsters out exploring the world with backpacks. Families split across countries or continents reuniting around trolleys filled with large suitcases and gifts. Would-be lovers living a moment of unprecedented hope. Old friends politely reconciling what they had before with the person they had just picked up, or had been picked up by.

The poor light meant Ben could leave a lot to his imagination. The people he half saw, half conjured up in his mind, inspired him, made him feel once again like a regular human being. The fear, the little hooves inside him, had gone silent.

Ben experienced the unusual sensation of wanting to be just like the people he saw. Not special, not better than them, just an ordinary shadow going about its business beneath the canopy of ordered red and green stars. Ben chewed on the strangeness of this sensation.

He shifted his seat back so he could hold his Tablet comfortably in front him, resting it on a protrusion in the steering wheel designed specifically for this task. He proceeded slowly as if he feared a sudden gesture might upset

his current sense of wellness and purpose. He paused, observed the window of artificial light of his Tablet, before he touched an icon on the screen and spoke his daughter's name.

Her recorded greeting appeared, so he quickly disconnected before it was time for him to leave a message. He needed to think this through. The vastness of the terrain before him was something he had not become accustomed to.

He called again and left a message. 'My dear, it's your father. I've been thinking about you and it would be good to talk.' He paused and cleared his throat. 'I thought I was showing the symptoms of the Dry Plague, but my doctor tells me I'm negative. I don't have it. I'll talk to you soon.'

His heart was beating again, though it was not the resonant hammering on the ribcage of before. Ben continued looking out through his windscreen at the phantom people getting to their cars, or leaving them. A thought bubbled up to the surface within him. He would take some days off and go down to Cape Town to see his daughter. Only this time he would do something he had never done before. He would take a bus. This eccentricity on his part might evoke a softening on hers. He would book into a hotel and see her, whenever it suited her. No rush, no urgency. In the remaining time, he would do tourist things in Cape Town. And yes, he would spend some time at the University of Cape Town, just wondering around in corridors and along stairways where the ghost of Dudu One may still be lingering. It would be a silly indulgence, but why not?

There was one snag with the last idea, of pursuing the ghost of Dudu One at the university, a snag Ben only thought of later as he was driving to the office. He might bump into his daughter in those same corridors, perhaps accompanied by friends. That would embarrass her, and him. This he had to avoid. He would have to think of places outside the university where the spirit of Dudu One may still be found.

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