

4 a.m.: The Voyage Home

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It's an epic journey, and it begins at four o'clock in the morning at an airport hotel in Munich.

I awoke in my clothes, sprawled on the king-sized feather bed on top of the duvet, checked the clock, stripped, showered, and wheeled my twin suitcases into the elevator. I was going home today.

I'd been sleeping on trains and cheap hostel mattresses for the past two weeks, sometimes catching up on sleep on benches in public parks during the hot afternoon, and so this last night in a nice hotel had been an indulgence for me. I ordered an expensive meal, two cups of coffee, a good cigar, chocolate cake, a beer, and pay-per-view TV in German, and now that I'd brushed the morning-after taste of cigar smoke off the back of my tongue, I put it all on my credit card and hoisted the luggage I would carry with me for the next 4,000 miles into the back of the airport shuttle. It was five o'clock in the morning.

The great airports of the world, in the great European cities, have a grandeur unappreciated by most of the hectic travelers that b-line point to point through their high, sky lit corridors.

I like to imagine that in 3,000 years, when our civilization is gone and trampled into history, that archeologists (or whatever they're called then) might find the relics of these long forgotten structures, might piece together their use; cathedrals of modern engineering, linking the world together four terminals and sixty foot tinted glass ceilings.

I've just spent five months in some of the most historically and culturally relevant cities in the western world, I've seen Westminster Hall, Notre Dame, the Eiffel Tower. Two days ago I'd been in Rome, touring the Coliseum and the Vatican. Yet there is no tour of these airports, architecturally beautiful and mind-bogglingly efficient as they are; no one marvels at the use of natural light in these modern palaces.

Especially in Europe, we spend so much time looking back, and so little looking forward.

We marvel that the Romans mastered the intricacies of indoor plumbing, and then think nothing of calling across continents, bouncing

stomach onto after four jugs of wine, gave me a reassuring smile as I stumbled out. "It 'appens, mon frere," he said, or so my friends told me the next day over toast and aspirin.

I've had much more trouble with the Americans.

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I did what I always do in these situations:**

**took two of the little blue Tylenol PM caplets
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our voices off satellites four miles high, from a mobile phone in a public restroom, all the while depositing foodstuffs from four different continents, and then cleaning our hands with anti-bacterial soap and flying (nothing but a few feet of aluminum and a couple thousand meters of air beneath our feet) a distance in two hours with a half week's pay what would have taken Caesar three weeks and four legions of centuries.

We have it pretty good here these days, most of us.

I pushed past the luggage counter and made a few calls to spend ten euros of foreign calling cards. In two hours I was in Paris, if only for another hour.

People say the French are difficult people, but I haven't found this to be the case. For the loud, impatient, fanny-pack wearing mid-westerner, the average Parisian might hold a drop of contempt. But, I spend much of my time abroad trying to remain invisible, and the wait-staff of the world appreciate this, I think, and disregard my little blue passport; everywhere I've gone these last five months, I've been treated well and served quickly. Even the manager of "Les Ancestres," the restaurant I emptied my

WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



"Oh, no," I said, "she told me she was from New Hampshire."

34G wouldn't have it, wouldn't believe Russia either, and bruised from her travels abroad, was less than ecstatic about my plan to get rid of a bottle of water and two glasses of wine served with the on-flight lunch.

"Oh, well, I guess we'll see if this damned seat will cooperate."

Seeing she was cranky and ready to guard the isle with her life, I retrieved my shaving kit from the overhead compartment and did what I always do in these situations; took two of the little blue Tylenol PM caplets I keep in an old Advil bottle and curled up like a turtle with a neck pillow until our plane hit Nova Scotia.

A hundred and five pound ball of girlfriend hit me as I left customs, knocking my newly inspected bags to the floor. It was good to be home.

Our trip from the airport and out of Boston was hampered by a walk to save homeless diabetic gerbils, or children with only one sock, or some such other malady. Two miles of angry Massachusians with horns watched sash-wearing do-gooders stroll by, sponsored at fifty-cents a mile. It struck me that, around mile one and a half, most of these thousand or so cars would have gladly paid these walk-a-thoners a few dollars to stay home.

Which is where I am now. 126 miles, two hours, a turkey club sandwich and a glass of orange juice bigger than my head later, I'm back in the house I grew up in, sitting at my childhood desk, writing the last installment of this series from abroad. And after coming so far, there is very little I'd rather do than go to sleep. After all, in London, it's still four o'clock in the morning.

"You're in my seat."

The spitting image of Madeline Albright stood over me in the isle of the Boston-bound 747.

"Oh, excuse me, I just thought..."

"Seat 34 G, the isle seat, that's mine. You're in my seat."

"Oh, so it is, F, I thought that was the isle, excuse me, let me just, ah..." I transplanted the books and binders from one seat pocket to the other; I was so sure I'd had an isle seat, misreading the seat letters jutting out from the ceiling, and now I consigned myself to six and a half hours of entrapment.

I'm sure the woman was very nice; she mentioned that she'd sprained her ankle in Paris, and, when I asked how, said she fell. Not much of a conversationalist, I turned to my other neighbor, 34E, from New Hampshire but, originally, from Russia. After twelve years in the U.S., she still spoke with a slight accent, and used words like "diffuse-ed" to describe the pattern of airflow in the cabin.

"She's from Warsaw," 34G whispered when 34E had gone to the lavatory.

"I'm sorry?"

"She's from Warsaw. From Poland."