

Clinging to the Under-carriage

First-class travel, a Greek tango teacher and a Dutch cat

April 1998

Michael declared it “definitely worth a lunch!”. With Lunch now on the table before us, he urged me on: “Now there’s got to be a film script in there... You know, Ingrid Bergman...”

It had long been an ambition to live and work in Europe. The Great Aussie Tour in 1977 had whetted my appetite to revisit monuments and places in digestible chunks rather than as scenes whizzing past on a kinoscope. By January 1998, it was time to make the move.

Being fourth generation Australian rendered me without any automatic rights of residency in Europe. The rules at the time were that you needed a job to get a work visa, but you needed a visa to get a job. What appeared to be the ideal position turned up with very strong recommendations by previous colleagues and a video-conference interview. It was decided that I would start work in the Sydney office of the company until my visa was approved in London, but could in the meantime work there on secondment, which I did.

Four weeks into the secondment, things were not working out. The senior partners of the firm who were so keen to have me there had not agreed the strategy with their middle management, whose plans for the company did excluded a new Head of Equity function. There also seemed to be some antipathy to my wanting to stop in Rome (at my own expense) on the way from Australia in order to buy an overcoat in the sales there. Offence seems to have been taken at the implication that British coats were not good enough¹. We decided to part company.

I was now in London without a work visa, but entitled to stay for a limited time as a tourist. Strictly-speaking this precluded looking for work, but with a small amount of imagination it became clear that some phone calls and informal meetings could at least get things going. They did - long enough to convince me that there were indeed plentiful opportunities for my skills. I had also found some temporary share accommodation to see me through until I landed a permanent position. The rub was that it wouldn't become available for a couple of weeks.

As I needed to return to Australia in any case to tie up some loose ends there, it seemed logical to do so in the interval until my accommodation became available. The trouble began when I returned to Heathrow and questions were asked about my reasons for spending so much time in the UK and whether I was looking for work, which I had no right to do without the appropriate visa.

I explained that, in fact the work was seeking me; but this representative of HM Immigration² failed to see the distinction. I was detained for about two hours, at the end of which they took my passport and booked me on the next flight to Australia

¹ I'm hardly alone in thinking Italy is a good place to shop for clothes.

² Played by Orson Wells, perhaps.

with Alitalia (with whom my return flight had been originally purchased), due to leave at 7.00 am on Saturday. It was now 17.00 on Thursday.

I asked if, from the point of view of UK Immigration, it was necessary that I return to Australia, or whether it was sufficient that I leave the UK. They said that as far as they were concerned I needed only to leave the UK and they asked me what I had in mind. I explained that I would like to go to Amsterdam to see my daughter, as I didn't know when otherwise I might see her again. They said they therefore advised - no insisted - that I contact the Netherlands embassy to check that that would be OK. I observed that they never checked passports at Schiphol. They replied that they just might on this occasion.

The questions now were: Where should I go? Sydney? I would then find it much harder to get a job in London, or indeed to leave Australia again. Amsterdam? But I might not be let in. The USA? Probably not. Somewhere cheap to live?? Was it possible to resolve things in London after all?

The immediate thing to do was to go to my tango class. Takis³, the instructor said that the solution was easy: "just tell them you're my lover - they'll have to let you stay then." He actually meant well, and in any case reckoned that it was worth a(nother) try anyway. I told him I would ring him and let him know what I had decided to do. For a spurned lover, he really was a good friend: having asked what I planned to do with my things (I had seven suitcases), he offered to store them in the club until I could sort out what I was doing. At this genuine kindness I fell about with gratitude. Assuming I would be flying out on Saturday morning, he invited me to dinner on Friday evening.



Las Estrellas

Before dawn on Friday I started ringing people. My ex-husband was at the time an adviser to the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs. It seems I had become caught up in a tit-for-tat between the Brits and the Australians that had been brewing for some time. Any intervention on his part was very likely to make matters worse.

The Netherlands embassy told me that, once denied entry to one EU country, no other EU country would have me. I rang the Swiss. They asked me how long I planned to stay and how much money I had. Three days I said, and listed my credit cards. "No problem."

Ophelia⁴ was adamant that I should get to Amsterdam somehow and she and Ben⁵ would find a solution: "if you go back to Oz now, you will never leave again." She was right, of course, but what I had now learned about my predicament gave me pause: I was wary of turning a disaster into a calamity.

It happened that Ophelia and her then boyfriend had moved there so Ben could take up a job with Greenpeace, for whom he had worked in Australia. After six months,

³ Rudolph Valentino or Peter Sellers.

⁴ Helena Bonham-Carter.

⁵ Gregory Peck.

Greenpeace had not yet sorted out their visas, and he hadn't been paid. The landlord of their microscopic flat had said they could pay the rent whenever they could, but otherwise they were existing on cash she was earning from babysitting; while Ophelia was also doing voluntary work for Friends of the Earth. It also meant that they didn't have the phone connected at home, as this service is very costly for non-residents.

By the time I had resolved to take the last flight to Geneva on Friday evening, Ophelia had left the office and they were now not directly contactable until Monday. I had told HM Immigration, who still had my passport, that I had decided to have a three-day break in Geneva before boarding another long-haul flight (by now I had not slept since Tuesday night). I rang Takis and said that I could now not have dinner with him on Friday because I had to get to Heathrow for the 20.00 flight to Geneva.

I had packed clothes for summer and winter, business and casual, into a large, cabin luggage suitcase. At this point I had no idea how long it was going to have to last. Nor exactly where I was going: I needed to be mobile.

This seems trite, but there are sometimes excellent reasons for travelling first class⁶. As the plane taxied to the terminal in Geneva, a number of names were read out: mine was first. I was grilled for half an hour by Swiss immigration officials⁷, who were convinced that I had been denied entry to the UK on health grounds (everybody was neurotic about HIV-AIDS at the time). I explained that I looked unwell because I hadn't slept for three days. They asked for *evidence* that this was the case! Rummaging in my handbag I found the ticket stub from my flight from Sydney.



Takis

Suddenly they were satisfied and asked: "So where will you stop tonight?" I said I imagined there would be a hotel at the airport that might have a room. "Oh yes, there are two. Would you like us to book you a room? Which hotel would you prefer? They rang the hotel and gave me a booking reference. It was well past midnight by the time I left their office and I was startled to see a small huddle of poor souls, mostly black, some with small children, waiting for their interrogations. The first class ticket had put me ahead in the queue, while tempers were still intact.⁸

I then forgot which hotel. I had no Swiss francs, and the ATMs at the airport accepted only Swiss cards! I persuaded the clerk at the wrong hotel to put the taxi fare on my room, which he did.⁹

Despite wondering all night how I was going actually to get into the EU, I had the presence of mind to go for a swim in the morning, which brought some colour to my face and made me feel better. Dressed and packed,¹⁰ I took the free shuttle to the

⁶ Michael: to begin with its more photogenic.

⁷ Impeccable uniforms, bristling with "correctness".

⁸ The Versace overcoat, which I had thought such an extravagance, probably did me no harm either.

⁹ The overcoat again.

¹⁰ Michael: now we'll have to change the timing here: bright Spring mornings won't do, it'll have to be about 11 on a foggy November night.

railway station and bought a first class ticket to Amsterdam. The train was due to leave in twenty minutes, so I bought a sandwich¹¹ and rang the woman for whom Ophelia babysat.

Bronwyn¹² was very excited to hear from me: “Ophelia told me what’s happened! How awful! But don’t worry too much: my sister is an immigration lawyer in London. She’ll sort something out!” When I explained that the train I had booked passed through Germany, she was as alarmed as I was: “Oh NO! Surely it would go through France?” I had thought so too. I could get by in French, but certainly not in German. I said that if I made it through Germany without getting arrested, I would get to Ophelia’s flat at about 22.30, and if she happened to see her, could she pass it on? Bless her: she got on her bike, literally and figuratively, rode over to Ophelia’s place and left a note under the door.

¹³Noting that the frontier town is Basel, I am looking out for two people in uniforms coming through the train speaking to each passenger in turn... two men duly appeared¹⁴, dressed in black woolen suits with peaked caps. I had remembered German police wearing green leather, but reasoned that things could have changed in twenty years. Now not normally being a criminal (despite the Australian origins - ha ha), one is somewhat *maladroit* about what is *de rigueur* when one is evading the Law. Surely they will check the loos? Perhaps not. Its worth a try.

Well, they took *forever* to work their way through the carriage, and indeed we had stopped at the next stop before I was sure they had actually passed. By this stage I was safe, as people got off and on, of which I might have been one. I won’t say I was relaxed, but felt confident¹⁵ enough to regain my seat (which was a nice one, with a lovely view over the Rhine).

It turned out that the two men in suits were in fact the barmen, taking orders for complimentary drinks. So I missed out on my *free drink* - which goes to show that the common perception that Australians never forego a free drink isn’t entirely true.¹⁶

Ophelia and Ben had planned to go to a party on Saturday night, and I had told Bronwyn that if they weren’t home I would wait for them at the Neue Leilie¹⁷, their local café. But I confess I was rather glad to see their light on. Ophelia nearly cried when she saw me.



¹¹ Michael: Wrong!! Strong coffee and a cigarette!

¹² Michael: We have to get Marlene Dietrich in here somewhere.

¹³ Sorry: clinging to the under-carriage...

¹⁴ Abbott and Costello.

¹⁵ Plenty of surreptitious glancing around and avoiding direct eye contact.

¹⁶ Never *intentionally* foregoing a free drink probably does still hold, though.

¹⁷ Tiny, subterranean smoke-filled joint.

The flat¹⁸ was so small that I had to sleep under the table¹⁹. On Monday I gave them some money and exhorted them to get the phone connected. It was Wednesday by the time this had happened and I started ringing people again. The first was an old colleague²⁰ in Sydney who had left a message on my answering machine a few minutes before I rushed out the door to get my flight from Sydney. He now operated the Asian franchise of a risk management company in London, of which I had been a client in Sydney. He had remarked to me more than once that there would always be a job for me at his firm “not necessarily a job you would like, but you never know.” Hmmm. I apologised for taking a week to return his call and explained what had happened.

I could hear him chuckling on the other end of the line. “Larry, I too will laugh about this in twenty years’ time, but its not funny yet!” “Would a job with QUANTEC help?” “But this is a huge favour to ask!” “What favour? I thought you would have signed on and be sitting at your desk by now.” “You mean QUANTEC in London??” “What did you think I meant?” “Never mind. What’s the guy’s name?”

It seems that my remark to the immigration fellow at Heathrow was truer than I imagined. QUANTEC was desperate to fill the position and were convinced that I was the best person. The receptionist picked up the phone and I heard her call out: “Robert! Its Frances!” Then, in the background: “Don’t let her go away!” Bingo.

There was then a bizarre conversation about where I was, and why I couldn’t pop into the office for a chat. So they sent one of their guys to conduct the interview at a delicatessen at Schiphol, which consisted of him telling me that QUANTEC was, contrary to what I may have heard, actually quite a nice place to work. I warned that I was not a salesperson and had never sold anything in my life. “That’s exactly why we want you: you know the products and how clients use them. The systems will sell themselves: we just need someone to tell people about them.” It was, by a country mile, the weirdest job interview I have ever had.

It took eight weeks to get the visa sorted. During that time, Ben found me a flat-sitting arrangement. It seems that squatters have powerful rights in the Netherlands, so anyone going on an extended trip seeks to get someone in their flat who will pay and then leave when they’re supposed to.

¹⁸ Photogenically located about 50 metres from Anna Frank’s house, but we’ll have to move it from the ground floor to the garret.

¹⁹ No: in a hidden closet in case the Police come to search the place.

²⁰ Humphrey Bogart: he has to be in it somewhere.

Ben got me the jackpot. The flat was newly renovated on two levels²¹, a few metres from Vondelpark - the poshest part of Amsterdam²². As a bonus it included the use of the owner's bike. But the amazing thing was that it came with a discount for minding the cat²³. Ben didn't mention to her that I would have happily paid a premium for the company of a cat.



Having promised to stay at QUANTEC for one at least a year, I worked there blissfully for three and a half years. Astute management of my travel budget allowed me to swan about the most elegant parts of France, Switzerland and Italy in my Versace coat. I travelled first class train carriages, staying put for the free aperitifs and stopping at some of the grandest hotels.²⁴ And many fine lunches.

Not so much Ingrid Bergman as Lucille Ball.

²¹ Including the garret.

²² A safe house in a respectable, middle class neighbourhood with an earnest family occupying the ground floor flat, who provide wholesome soup and cheese.

²³ A Siamese with a collar secret messages encoded on it.

²⁴ Lots of marble, gilt and long-stem roses.