

Saturday 27th of March

Stockholm Syndrome

I flew to Sweden for a work trip, because my job is extremely arduous and I travel all the time and never hear a word of sympathy from my readers. I got off the plane at Stockholm airport and boarded the express train to the city. During the journey a short informational video was screened about how to use an escalator. You should always ensure your baggage is kept in front of you, apparently, or there is a risk it may topple over, bounce down the steps and seriously injure a passenger behind.

After the announcer had explained the nature of the danger, there was a dramatisation of a typical wrongly-placed-baggage accident. A woman nudged her suitcase, which clipped the ankle of a man on the next step and then plunged spectacularly down the escalator, gathering tremendous speed as it fell.

I waited eagerly for the final frame, in which the rogue luggage slammed into an innocent family, killing and maiming everyone in its path, but in fact it landed safely and didn't even break open. Mystifyingly, there was no escalator at the end of the journey anyway.

When I stepped out into the streets of Stockholm, it was desperately cold, and yet one of the first people I saw was a bare-legged man dressed as a Viking. I assumed most Swedes must wear Viking costumes at night, but I never noticed another one.

At my hotel's reception, the check-in bloke gave me a form to fill in, so I gave him my credit-card details and promised my life savings in the event that I should accidentally bump against one of the tiny tinnies of beer in the mini-bar.

"Sign here," he said, in his Flowerpot Men accent, "and on the backside."

As unsympathetic readers will know, I am a Z-list celebrity and highly sought-after nude model in Australia, but I didn't realise my fame had spread to Scandinavia. I waited for the receptionist to drop his daks so I could autograph his buttocks, but all he did was turn over the sheet of paper and point to another dotted line.

Stockholm was covered in snow. The whole city was like a big, white blobby thing.

The next morning, after an overnight snowfall, it looked even whiter and blobbier, but I decided to use my brief leisure time in Sweden to visit the Skansen, an outdoor museum, where a visitor can get an idea of what Sweden looked like in the past: it looked like a big, white blobby thing.

Also in the Skansen was a museum of smoking and, less promisingly, matches. (The match was a Swedish invention. Who knew?) I quite enjoyed looking at all the old cigarette boxes, printed in the days before every packet came with a picture of a cancerous tumour on the front, and even the different matchboxes were oddly pleasing when displayed together in a cabinet.

Elsewhere in Stockholm is a museum of drinking, which I will visit next time. If they had a museum of kebabs, the Swedes would have memorialised my entire adult life.

I had lunch with a beautiful actress, which is never a good idea. I buttered my bread with the table knife, which left me with an implement the size of a cheese knife to eat my lunch with. Then I tucked into my forkful of what I assumed was coconut relish but turned out to be pickled horseradish, which tore through my nostrils like cocaine cut with detergent, and seared a big red hole in my brain.

The national pastime in Sweden in winter is falling over on the icy pavements, and I threw myself into this with culturally appropriate enthusiasm. I slipped onto my back outside the railway station, and even managed to slide halfway under a taxi while I

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tried to climb into the back seat.

A more realistic informational video might show people, rather than suitcases, toppling to the ground, and hundreds of Swedes hurrying past them taking no notice at all. _

Saturday 06th of March 2010

Bad News Brews

I went to see the doctor about my cholesterol level, which was fine, and she tested my blood pressure, which wasn't. I don't really know what blood pressure is, but apparently it's a good thing to have but a bad thing to have too much of.

She asked how much alcohol I drank in a week. I used the standard method of calculation: invented a low total, halved it, then cut out any drinks that arose from extraordinary circumstances such as a birthday, a barbecue, a wake, a chance reunion with an old friend, a work function or visit to the pub.

She said alcohol was a cause of high blood pressure, and I had to cut down. But, after all my tortuous computations, there was no fat left to trim - except from my body. I was 13 kilos overweight, and not much of that was hair. So I lost 10 kilos in the gym. (If you find it, you're welcome to it.) I returned to the doctor, who told me my blood pressure was lower but still far too high. It was my fourth abnormal reading, and I should go on blood-pressure-reducing tablets.

Obviously, this was just her ambit claim, so I negotiated her down. What if I took off another three kilos instead? She agreed, doubtfully and temporarily.

Each time I'd had my blood pressure tested, I'd been drinking the night before. I told my friend, Chris the CFO, I planned to have a week of sobriety before I submitted to the procedure again. "And what, exactly, would the reading represent then?" he asked, cruelly.

My partner, Claire, borrowed a home sphygmomanometer from her dad. I kept forgetting to use it, so she ambushed me when I got back from a drink at a mate's house, and tied it to my arm while I still had a beer (low-carb, for health reasons) in one hand. The tightening of the grip of the cuff around my biceps felt disturbingly like getting arrested, and the reading was 156/80, which meant I was nearly dead.

It was the week of my son Ben's fifth birthday, and his first day at school. I'd missed his kindy debut, when he'd proudly put on his new backpack and promptly toppled onto his back, so I was keen to be around for this next landmark. I clutched his hand tightly all the way, as if it were my first day rather than his. He seemed to enjoy school, although he complained that some of the other children played an unrealistic game of dinosaurs, in which plant-eating dinosaurs attacked their meat-eating cousins, and he was sure this was historically inaccurate. That's my boy.

I stopped drinking and tested my blood pressure every morning. It varied wildly from 143/72 to 119/80, but I found every reading immensely satisfying. If it was low, I felt healthy and vindicated. If it was high, it was as if I had done well at a video game.

("Yesss! It's my second-biggest score ever! There's death in the old dog yet!") The readings began to fall after one day without a drink, and were normal after a week. So I probably don't really have high blood pressure, it's just that it's best not to strap on the sphygmomanometer when you're holding a beer, even if it is low carb.

We held a small party for Ben's birthday. He had asked that people buy him only Transformers - "nothing else" - and enough of them complied to make him very happy. The children played pass the parcel, which I DJ'd, but there were no games for the adults.

I really wanted to hold a blood-pressure competition with the sphygmomanometer. I know the blokes would've enjoyed it, and we even had a doctor on hand to verify the

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results (which is very important in professional blood-pressure sports) but there were a couple of guests I didn't know very well and I was worried they might try to have me committed to a mental hospital if I suggested it.