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LIVING BETWEEN THE LINES

I have always liked plane travel at night. It's as if I am in a dark, peaceful bubble being soothed by the gentle throb of the engine and the repetitive hum of the air conditioning. No one can bother me. Except for tonight. Tonight I had the seat from hell.

I was on the aisle in the centre row of four. A small noisy girl was next to me, then her mother, then a smaller louder boy. The children were bouncing on the chairs and over the harried woman, flicking lights on and off, wailing, and slapping over juice cups as though they were bowling pins. The mother had clearly lost control.

Every now and then the little girl froze and gave me a demonic stare. I burrowed deeper into my blanket hoping to be too inanimate to be of interest. Closing my eyes I wished myself back to my high-flying corporate days when I sometimes flew business class. Flat beds; fine wines; no plastic forks; movies of choice. And best of all . . . no kids!

As though telepathic, an air hostess soon glided down the aisle, winked conspiratorially and offered me a row of three empty seats away from the adjoining circus. I hesitated for an appropriate

second, then launched across the aisle as though shot from an ejector seat.

When my wife, Mandy, distracted by another of our kids' drink spills, finally noticed my absence, she looked at me as though I had just taken the last chopper out of a hot zone.

Mandy and I took turns in the three-seat row during the flight, allowing me space to think about what lay ahead. There were a lot of unknowns to consider. I may have been strapped in by the seatbelts but couldn't restrain my thoughts from running off in anticipation. They all focused on the seven-berth motor home waiting for us in the Netherlands. Months earlier, we'd zapped off 14,000 euros to buy it over the internet. I was slightly concerned we had been sucked into an internet scam, but the image of this wonderful craft had been seared into my mind for months, even dreamt about for years, and had recently transformed into a magical star ship that promised to provide our travelling family with nirvana for the next year.

Consequently, two days later, on a grey Tuesday morning in August, on the way to view this new motor home, I was so excited I was quivering more than a wet puppy in a cold wind. The dream was about to come true.



Donna, an eccentric Dutch American who bought and sold used motor homes for a living, chatted away about her cats while weaving her little red Fiat from lane to lane down the motorway out of Utrecht. As her car could only carry one passenger, Mandy and the kids had remained back at the hotel, mainly because I had begged and pleaded with Mandy to be the first to drive the machine. Donna soon pulled off the highway and the car bounced down a narrow dirt path, stopping behind a dilapidated old farmhouse and windmill.

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‘It’s in here, John.’ She pointed to the windmill. It seemed a very strange place for a professional operation to store motor homes.

Donna jumped out of her car and wrenched back the windmill’s big timber doors in a surprising show of strength. ‘Look. Look at it!’ she cried.

I peered beyond the doors and felt an instant gush of relief. Inside the shed were rows of renovated gleaming antique cars. Donna obviously had a passion for autos and was just the right person, I thought, to have cared for our new home during the past few months since we’d bought it. I squinted further into the dark recesses of the shed, eager for the first view of the motor home, as though on a blind date. Donna flicked a switch, the lights blinked and a dark shape slowly came into focus.

I gaped in silence, frozen to the ground. This first sight of our motor home was supposed to be a moment of exultation, of trumpets blaring ‘Hallelujah’, declaring a life-reclaiming event was about to begin. Instead I stared in complete and utter devastation.

In the rear corner of the shed sat a big white box with faded red racing stripes down the side. The engine hood was open, with cables attached to various parts as though it were on life support. The ‘thing’ was covered in a thick film of dust. It sat there discarded, disowned and decrepit, in teasing contrast to the sparkling antiques surrounding it.

‘We’ve had some problems getting it started,’ Donna said.

‘Uh huh,’ was my reply.

Mandy and I had gambled everything for this shit heap. We had no jobs, no income and had just torn a hole in our savings. Our car was sold, the house rented, probably to the Manson family. All our beloved possessions were in a storage shed gathering cobwebs. We were about to launch into a world without TV, internet, telephones, friends, family, toys or schooling for the kids. We had an old laptop with some children’s DVDs, one small backpack of clothes each and

no idea where we were going or for how long. And I was about to sleep, eat, pee and shower together with my wife and our two kids for a year in this rolling box smaller than our bedroom. I stared long and hard at the motor home, wondering again how I had got here.



It all began on Christmas Day the year before. My brother-in-law Terry and I had been playing a swashbuckling game of table tennis, progressively hitting the balls harder as we smashed our way around; two male egos in our own gladiatorial ping-pong arena. With two points to win, I launched across the table wildly. Swinging the bat in a long arc, pain ripped into my back as though a sniper had shot me with a hot bullet. In noiseless slow motion I landed on the ground. For long seconds I lay there staring at the sky, waiting, blinking.

‘Get up, ya wimp!’ came the call from across the net.

I moved and cried out in pain. I immediately thought I had burst a disc, but I was wrong. I had burst two discs, the lower two.

This was the first in a series of shock strikes that would create the revolutionary period I would later refer to as when my back went ‘snap’ and my career went ‘poof’.

I was mostly bedridden for the next two weeks, sucking on valium pills like they were sugar-coated lollies. The drugs worked on my back but could not dull my whirring brain. I insisted on working, literally flat out, making calls to the office from my bed and whacking away on the laptop day and night. I was on the executive team for a global public listed company, and had been negotiating to buy another company in India for the past year. It had become my own personal mission that I lived and breathed.

Unfortunately my kids didn’t understand the gravity of the situation. They kept surging into my bedroom, curious and

entertained by the sight of their dad, horizontal and at home during the day.

My four-year-old daughter Jaimie, as usual, led the charge one sunny morning, her blonde hair falling down over her blue eyes and freckles. She stood, smiling in her giraffe pyjamas with a hopeful glint in her eye, the spokesperson for every plot she and her two-year-old brother Callum hatched. He was smaller, with his grandmother's olive skin and a mop of brown hair, and stood loyally next to her in red Spiderman pyjamas waiting for my attention. They reminded me of C3PO and R2D2, the taller, chattier one always blaming the littler one who couldn't speak properly for anything that went wrong.

'Do you want to play dolly with us . . . pleeease?' Jaimie pleaded, handing me her unattractive doll.

I held 'Scary Dolly', as she was affectionately known, up in front of my laptop. 'Oh, I can't, kiddies. I have to work.' Scary Dolly and her two pyjama-clad sidekicks would have to wait.

'Aw! Can you sing "Barbie Girl" with us?'

That was one of my specialties. 'Nup. Sorry. Later.'

Their faces dropped and they soon scurried off, but my eyes followed them, a little thought drifting like a ghost behind them.

I started replaying the past few days and nights. I'd watched Mandy pick the kids up and put them to bed while I stood by like a broken appendage. When would I be able to hold them? And how could I keep a job if I couldn't sit upright? My work? Shit, my work! What was I doing? I had no time for these distractions. I turned back to my computer, but soon floated further off into weird thought-bubbles of acute clarity, losing hours staring at the ceiling, thinking.

Pop! My work sucked. Well, more so the people, not the actual work. I had buried this knowledge for some time, but the unusual cocktail of excessive spare time, a comfy big bed and valium pills had

burst the thought wide open. An influx of new people had created a pervading 'me' culture at work. Trust and loyalty were eroding. Redundancies were happening for the first time. I had revelled in the company for over a decade and I wasn't averse to change but not like this.

Weeks later I popped painkillers to attend an important board meeting to summarise the Indian deal. After so much isolated time in bed, my brain was whirring with conflicting thoughts and I entered the boardroom in a rather skittish frame of mind. The chairman was a legend of the corporate scene who delivered questions rapid fire and expected precise answers.

I was soon given the floor but was immediately cut off by one of my team members who took over the presentation. I was gobsmacked, but decided a confrontation in front of the board would not be good. Instead I eased back into my chair and tried to look unflustered.

The presentation started with 'As John was not available . . .' confirming the 'me' games I had avoided so well were now upon me. I don't know if it was the valium or my sudden wish to be transported from the situation, but my mind drifted off to memories of a fellow I'd contracted to paint my house years earlier. I remembered he was always up on the roof, which was odd given I wasn't getting the roof painted.

'Hey Johnno!' he screamed one afternoon. 'Can't you see it, man?'

'See what?' I jumped, looking around for a snake.

'The lines!' the mad painter yelled. 'You're living between the lines, man!'

Standing in my shiny polyester grey suit, the 25-year-old me yelled upwards, 'What are you talking about, man?' This was back when it was cool to call everyone 'man'.

'The fucking lines, man! They're trying to box us in! Everywhere you go, there are lines. This block of land,' he waved his paintbrush.

‘Fences! Driving down the road . . . fucking lanes. Queuing at the bank! Swim between the flags. They’re trying to cage us in, man!’

I laughed. ‘Don’t worry, man. It won’t happen to me.’

‘Ha! You’re already trapped, you poor bastard!’ he screeched. ‘You know it! Hopping to the beat. Playing the games. Get out. Escape . . . while you can!’

Was that even possible? It occurred to me that this boardroom world had played a large part in snuffing out the adventure in my existence. Riding on the rooftops of buses in Africa, or stowing away on a Colombian cargo plane over the Amazon, felt like dreams rather than memories. I heard my name and snapped back to attention, then realised it was only being used in the context of me not being available the last few weeks. I chuckled, but it wasn’t a happy chuckle. What folly, I thought. Here I was, barely able to sit up, and playing around me was a game of ego. My biggest worry over the past month had not been that I couldn’t carry my kids to bed but rather that some business in India might not get purchased.

There was something awfully wrong with my priorities and, right then, the stranger I had become finally struck me. I was dragging myself to meetings at the expense of my health and ignoring my family at the same time. My career had become my defining priority. My social life was my work life. Adventure was a bygone concept. The mad painter was right. I had to escape.

‘Anything else to add, John . . . from your perspective?’ The pointed question jolted me out of my delirious state. All the important faces wheeled around at me like gun turrets. I stared back down their barrels taking in each one of them. I saw mentors, good guys and sociopaths.

The seconds ticked away as they waited for my reply. My statement needed to be witty, detailed, professional and balanced. I had to brilliantly retake control.

But I no longer wanted to play. It suddenly all seemed so silly.

My leg was jiggling under the table. It was a moment of discovery that I will never forget. It was the moment, for my working world, that I no longer gave a fuck.

I didn't even get up. I just took a deep breath, hoisted the white flag and said, 'Nope.'



In the taxi home I became marginally psychotic, slapping myself on the forehead for my stupidity. Then I laughed, crazy like a demon. Then reality knocked again. I may have wanted to stick my middle finger in the air towards the working world, but I didn't have that luxury. I was a husband and a father of two. I was the current breadwinner. We had a mortgage and responsibilities. My 'nope' was a blip. It had to be.

With the acceptance that career and parenthood had captured my life, I trudged back into the house and slumped down on the couch feeling like I may as well have sawn off my own testes and hung them in the company trophy cabinet. The house was in darkness, the kids were in bed. It was a familiar scene: me arriving home late, a meal sitting on the kitchen bench with plastic covering it, waiting to be reheated.

Mandy bounced down the stairs, keen to talk to someone over the age of four. I filled her in on my mad moment of surrender and started discussing my unavoidable fight-back before being interrupted by the kids' yells about a spider in their room. Mandy went to investigate, leaving me on the couch thinking.

It was becoming a dangerous pastime, this thinking. I knew that something had broken in me that day. And I knew I should be the one smashing that huntsman; spider killing was one of my key roles in the family. And yet my back meant I couldn't even do that. What was left?

Mandy returned to find me staring at her.

‘What’s life really about?’ I punched my hands together. ‘Living it!’ I shouted before she could reply. ‘This back thing. It’s a wake-up call! Life can be snatched away in a nano-second! Why does it have to take a massive tragedy in people’s lives before they stop and think, shit, am I really enjoying this?’ I paused to collect my thoughts. ‘What if I died tomorrow? Was hit by a bus? What if I was diagnosed with cancer and given a few months to live?’

She raised her eyebrows waiting for the answer.

I asked her to think of a fantasy, a dream, maybe a great purpose . . . and then imagine actually doing it. Tapping into something that makes you so excited your heart pumps and you gasp for breath. ‘That’s what life is about!’

She was as confused by this dramatic enthusiasm as she had been with my previous despairing self. ‘Go on,’ she said, leaning forward. ‘I’m listening.’

‘Well we haven’t done anything outrageous in ages,’ I continued. ‘We can’t just meander along collecting more TVs and end up at the pearly gates with a bunch of assets, “if only” and “what ifs”! So let’s do it!’

‘Do what?’

Now all my dangerous thinking converged on one point. ‘Well . . . you know I’ve always said that one of my dreams was to hoot around Europe in an old orange VW camper.’

‘Bit late,’ she laughed, holding up a dirty nappy as though it were a visual aid. ‘That was when you were twenty-two.’

I chose to ignore this ageist remark. ‘But it doesn’t have to be too late. They’re talking about redundancies at work. If it happened to me, we could just take the payout and go!’

‘Oh rubbish! They won’t sack you. And anyway, if they did, we’d need that money to survive on.’

‘Yes, and that would be the responsible thing to do. But . . . and this is just a thought,’ I paused for effect. ‘What about if we just say fuck it and go?’

Mandy was a traveller from way back. While being only five foot two with a bob of brown hair, she had been a formidable tour guide across Russia and Egypt, herding tourists around like stray cats and dealing with everything from her driver’s rampant sexual exploits among the punters, to talking down suicide attempts. It was her sharp wit and acute, searching intelligence that had always both attracted and challenged me. Not to mention her blonde surfer look when we first got together. We had once regularly sipped wine and babbled away into the wee hours about wandering the world, but these dreams had been sealed into a locked closet since we became parents.

Mandy had turned away from her corporate career some years earlier to chase her passion for writing. It was a joint decision but the advent of kids and Mandy’s desire to be at home with them while juggling her writing had slowly eroded our egalitarianism. To say we had drifted apart was a stretch, but we both knew we could enter that slippery road at any time.

‘OK. I like those four words. Fuck it and go. So how?’

I calculated how much the redundancy payment would be. ‘Let’s buy a camper and do it. What’s the point in waiting till we’re retired to live our dreams? We may not be around or physically able to then anyway.’

‘And what about the kids?’

‘Come on. You’re thinking between the lines, man. We get like a Winnebagoey thingy, a big one. Six berth. Kitchen on board. Toilet, shower, TV, bikes strapped on the back. The works!’

I could hear her mind ticking. She’d spent the past two months nursing me, driving me everywhere, and dealing with my frustrations and moods. This was not a sane suggestion. She got up and walked

across the room and out onto the deck. I was waiting for all the negatives. After all, she hadn't had the benefit of bedridden weeks of accumulated thinking time.

'We've always talked about heading off again,' I called and then added dramatically, 'travel is like air to us. We're suffocating without it!'

She eventually returned and stood in front of me. 'No TV,' she said.

I was confused.

'We're not having a TV in my camper.'

I scanned her face and realised she was beaming. 'Yes!' I punched my arm in the air.

'One more thing,' she said.

'Yeah. What? Anything.'

'Why did you just call me man?'



We had agreed to take the plunge but our logical brains kept us frozen in inaction. It was too big a risk, too much change. Then a week later, I was summoned to another meeting. This time there was just the CEO and one other manager, both nervous and stumbling through words as though a bee had stung their tongues. After some minutes of verbal Twister they eventually straightened and said, 'We're going to have to make you redundant.'

Rejoice! It was exactly what I wanted; what Mandy and I had plotted. We could start reclaiming our life!

Then I thought maybe it was a joke. Surely the past ten years of hard work I'd given the company meant something? I sat there disbelieving. Like a jilted lover, I suddenly wanted no part in this divorce. I rationalised that I had given up the moment I said 'nope' in the boardroom weeks earlier, but yet the rejection sucked the wind out of

me. I eventually wandered away from the meeting, realising that there was no longer any 'me' in their corporate 'we'.

I returned to my desk later to find police tape on the floor in the shape of a murder victim, a not-so-subtle staff protest against people being 'executed' in the redundancy process. I smiled at that and walked out.

In the solitude of the taxi ride home, the finality of it all crushed my chest. It was as though I had lost a dear family member. I walked in through the front door, deadened to my back pain and crawled into my wife's arms.



I huddled under the blankets till after midday the next day. Apparently the world was now my oyster, but I wanted to keep the shell closed. And now, all of my brave yahoo about 'Let's just do it' was firmly on the table.

I edged forward slowly, scanning the net for suitable travelling craft, with no idea what I was looking for or in what country. I'd never even seen inside a motor home let alone bought one. My vision of an air-conditioned luxury coach with a separate parents' bedroom was very quickly modified to the equivalent of a tent with metal sides and wheels. I looked at big motor homes, little ones, old ones and shitheaps that, while affordable, I refused to consider. There was even one with red racing stripes on its sides. The pictures of it looked spectacular.

I soon learnt that our purchase had to be held by a third party because we couldn't own a motor home without an EU passport. This led me to a small business in Holland that would sell us a van and hold the ownership papers. We'd be exposed. They could rip us off at any time. But I was now snorting the travel cocaine, experiencing

psychedelic flashes of me driving this wondrous vehicle across foreign lands, and so assured myself the risk was worth it.

It wasn't long until I was made to feel a lot less certain about the trip.

Jaimie's kindergarten teacher declared that a long absence would damage our children's intellectual development. Mandy had just had her first book published, *Family Village Tribe* (the story of Flight Centre and how the company's structure was based on Stone Age tribes), and had been busy promoting it. A 2UE radio announcer asked her if it was responsible taking kids overseas given the recent rise in terrorist acts around the globe. (Unfortunately the higher statistical chances of getting killed in a car outside our front door held no weight in the shock-jock world.)

Horror-stricken parents we knew also pronounced: 'You and your kids? In a van? For a year? I can't think of anything worse! See you in three months . . . if you make it that long!'

And then there was the Australian government's useful travel warning site. It advised travellers to avoid known terrorist attack targets including houses, hostels, hotels, shopping centres, special events, tourist sites, bars, clubs, cafés, restaurants, airports, schools, churches, banks, car parks and planes. Somehow they had missed motor homes, so we were in the clear – if we could swim there and stay in caves.

All of these opinions just added to my own whispering doubts. *You've committed career hari-kiri. Your kids need stability. You're avoiding the stench of redundancy. Who are you without your respected job title? Money, money, money!*

I started to feel like we were missiles shooting through the skies with a very clear target, and yet a barrage of deflectors were trying to send us off track by attacking our insecurities.

The cumulative pounding of these negativity bombs finally shook my resolve. We hadn't yet bought the van. We could still pull

out. ‘What have we done?’ I asked Mandy one night, suggesting that two kids under five, long-term travel, foreign places and camping in a box together were possibly a stupid cocktail.

‘Follow me,’ she said. ‘Ignore the dream stealers.’ She took me by the hand and led me upstairs. I thought it was an odd moment for sex but who was I to question?

On the wall of the bathroom was a giant poster of a walled city fortress hanging over spectacular blue waters. ‘Dubrovnik,’ she pointed.

‘I’ve gotta go there!’ I gasped.



In a final test, a week later the MD offered me another job back at the company.

For a moment I was buzzed about being offered a lifeline back to the corporate ship, but then I realised it was more a net back onto the trawler and I was the prawn. As that realisation dawned, my smile broadened. For Mandy and I, in wine-soaked revelry, had pressed the button on our computer the night before. With a gasp of exultation, we had wired 14,000 euros to Europe to buy a motor home.

It was too late. ‘Appreciate that,’ I replied to him, knowing I was about to cut the line forever, ‘but no thanks. The company isn’t the vehicle for my future anymore.’ Mandy and I had another vehicle in mind for that.

It was now my chance to live out my dream. From now on when I spoke of ‘we’, it would be about me and my family, not the corporate ‘we’.



My back going snap and my job going poof had produced the unwanted perfect storm that landed me in the doorway of an old

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windmill on a farm somewhere in Holland. And for a brief moment, as I flashed back through the previous months, the shock of seeing the motor home receded. I was still smiling, sensing I'd been given a gift. Except I had no idea what I was supposed to do with it.

I didn't know what this trip would produce. Maybe it would be a lengthy indulgence. Maybe it would be like a visit to sideshow alley, and afterwards I'd return to my seat in the main circus with nothing changed but a better photo album.

What I did know was that I had dreamt of this trip since I was twenty-two and now I was going to do it. Albeit in a slightly bigger and more dilapidated van, with a wife, two children and with less time than I had originally planned in the hofbrauhaus. But I was frothing with excitement. We were no longer going to live between the lines. We were going to go on the road . . . with kids!

2

UNRAVELLING

The old windmill on the farm outside Utrecht had, at some time in decades past, been painted purple with red doors. Most of that had now flaked away, leaving spots on its ghost grey timber like faded paint bombs. I entered the shed and walked through the sea of beautiful antique autos towards the brooding ugly sister in the corner. But I didn't want to get close, instead pacing around the giant motor home in slow motion, keeping a cautious distance.

The internet images that drew me in had clearly been like an ageing supermodel's airbrushed photo shoot. The red racing stripes were barely distinguishable through the film of dust. The battery cables to the open engine had certainly not featured before. If this were to be the vehicle that was to deliver us to the promised land, I figured it was going to take more than forty days and nights just to clean it.

I continued staring at the beast as Donna passed me the keys.

'I've partly cleaned her to show you how it might look. See the bonnet.' She pointed with pride.

I leant forward to identify one square section of the vehicle that was gleaming white.