

# **THE TRAVELLER (SAMPLE)**

*By Garrett Addison.*

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## Chapter - 1.

“How long’s this one for?” my wife asked with an ambiguous level of interest while I threw my ‘A’ set of clothes into my usual red suitcase. I cringed and fought to compose myself at that question, familiar and inevitable. Whether it’s going to be a long one or just an overnighter any reply I give is equally likely to be received with ambivalence or resentment, so I naturally tried to change the direction of the pending argument, “Not long. I’ll be back in time for ...”. I couldn’t for the life of me remember what I was to miss on this particular occasion. This wasn’t good grounds for me to field the query.

Surprisingly though, my wife was very accommodating and didn’t seize the gift of an opportunity to win another round of our perpetual row. “This trip won’t be like the others,” she said.

“I can’t not go,” I groaned, choosing to cautiously deal with her comment as if a pre-cursor to the familiar ‘don’t go’ themed discussion. “You know what the Anti-Christ will think.”

“I know you have to go,” she said with heartfelt understanding. “I’m just saying this one will be different.” My comment didn’t even incite a reference to my boss.

“I sincerely doubt it,” I mumbled and was even tempted to ask her to qualify what she meant, but I didn’t. “It’s going to be the same crap.” In this case, she would have been right, but to challenge her was to provoke the typical discord or invite an explanation of her fey perception, both of which never end well. It’s just like hearing what I missed each time I come home, good and bad, and how the family coped, even though whether they managed well or poorly is very much like debating my favourite between gonorrhoea and syphilis. Then the arguments always start. ‘So when are you going away again?’. It’s either too soon or not soon enough. On this occasion she let it go and didn’t say anything.

“It’s not like I want to go,” I continued, softening my approach when I didn’t get any reaction. She’s many frequent flyer miles short of the epiphany beyond the great myth of work travel when the novelty value passes, despite my perpetual efforts

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to convince her otherwise. After crossing that line initially so many years ago and so routinely since, to me the travel is just the mundane punctuation between visits home and the myriad of different companies I consult to. There's no fun or excitement in it; it's just something I need to contend with and tolerate unless I want to look elsewhere for employment. Today she only shrugged and smiled, stroking one of the many business shirts in my case which she'd purchased for me over the years.

That she was so calm on the cusp of another of my departures un-nerved me and again tempted me to segue our discussion as a distraction to my packing. The 'Anti-Christ', otherwise known as my boss and the reason why I don't leave my job is a familiar theme and often ends in us ranting over the one who presides over the perpetual blur between my personal and professional lives. Then I anticipated the way that exchange would go and I went cold on the idea. My wife would inevitably tell me to look for another job like she normally did and while she has a point, I always resented her suggesting it as if I hadn't considered it myself. I consider it every single day.

"See how you feel after this one," she said. No provocation, no anger, no resentment, no resignation, no frustration. My wife never balked at any excuse to say what she thinks of my boss or my travel, but on this occasion she did. My wife knows how my boss's absolute power renders me fearful, docile, not really ever at home and travelling so widely that I'm rarely in the same city or country more than a few times. In particular, my wife sees my struggle to find balance and the incessant failure in my eyes each day I come home defeated. It was wholly unlike her to not at least comment on what she thought of my fielding the abusive calls from my boss day and night, or that there are voids in our time together at the dubious whims of a manager with all the human qualities of a virus. I gathered our last hours together were not going to degrade into well-meaning discussion of my options; something I was particularly thankful for.

Then my wife caught me from left field with what epitomised her 'cup half full' biased interpretation of my travelling life. "This trip will be different. Just embrace it," she said, throwing her idea of a lucky tie into my case for good measure just before I closed it. The remark did not go un-noticed though.

I took my case to the door and thought about her frustrating optimism, often a precursor to banter illustrating how little she really understands my travelling life. Somehow she's remained oblivious to the jetlagged sleep deprivation, long days

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working like a seal weary from the matinee but still performing for the afternoon and evening shows, and often obligatory socialisation in accordance with cultural or professional expectations. When I'm not being coerced into long hours of pseudo-social drinking, I'm alone in my hotel room, alone at a bar or alone at a restaurant for dinner. The next day it all starts again. The destinations change, but the routine is always the same. All this and still subject to derision by phone, email or my boss's favourite: professional malignment by third party.

Then this particular trip assumed a familiar feel despite my wife's initial foreboding and aloof behaviour. "Off you go then, again," she said. The turn in her mood had come a little later than usual, but there it was, cold and angry. "We'll be ok. Again." It was the usual seed for an argument narrowly averted by the arrival of my taxi. My wife's parting words as I left were a shot, a suggestion my trip was little more than a sexual rendezvous with 'Stalin', another less than flattering pet-name for my boss.

I settled into my routine for my 'red-eye', the mid-night flight designed for the desperate or those naively trying to maximise their at-home time. Falling into the latter category, I'd chosen the flight deliberately and to me it epitomised my best efforts in trying for a work-life balance. It also saved me from having to contend with sad farewells from disappointed children in favour of just not being there in the morning when they woke. After a few beers at the airport lounge, I switched to cheap scotch as soon as I was airborne and the free alcohol of the international flight started to flow, occasionally adding a 'Virgin Mary' to demonstrate my commitment to hydration. The air hostess and I both knew the tomato juice was just a ruse to keep the liquor flowing, but she conceded nothing.

As my blood alcohol level rose, my mood mellowed and I settled to watch an impressive electrical storm through the aircraft window. The fingers of light enveloped the entire fuselage and while no-one spoke to me, clearly most passengers were concerned as to whether the plane really was as safe as the captain insisted amid the perpetual vibrations of thunder. Despite being more than a little un-nerved, I didn't share the abject fear of others. After having lived so long in fear at work I wasn't worried for whether I lived or died. For this I held my boss responsible, the one who had systematically destroyed my confidence and will over the years and to such an extent that I was now just a drone at her bidding. Castration by wayward lightning strike would not have taken anything from me she hadn't taken already.

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Between the near perpetual travel and her abusive inspiration she'd all but killed me inside, so in contrast the lightning really wasn't that big a deal.

Eventually the liquor began to sedate me a little, though not quickly enough to prevent me spilling some juice over myself before I nodded off. The hostess made some attempt to sponge me clean while I probably made drunken small-talk and wondered if there was something even remotely sexual in her attentiveness to my lap. God knows what I said to her. By this time I was barely coherent to myself so I don't think I would have presented myself well to anyone, her in particular.

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I remember rousing some hours later to the first hint of dawn over the starboard wing and the smells of day-old bacon, re-constituted scrambled eggs and bitter coffee, all of which appealed, and I had no hangover. I should have known something was different immediately. The hostess, my hostess, even shared a smile better suited to first class while she offered me more than my share of juice and I accepted graciously and as politely as I could. Perhaps I would have made some sober, clever remark or made an attempt to be more than a humble economy class guest if I'd remembered her name from the evening before.

I met up with her again going through the arrivals hall. Priority baggage handling, my company's best effort in-lieu of an upgrade, had me quickly through proceedings, though nowhere near as quickly as all of the aircrew. She watched me get into a discussion with an immigration official about the validity of my visa, smiling with empathy at the posturing of the official in his moment of power. Out of the terminal, she separated from her colleagues as they headed to a staff minibus while she grabbed a taxi. She knew I was watching her and she waited with the taxi door open suggestively.

I stared at her for a time; I couldn't help it. I'd smelled her on the plane; all freshly scented when everyone else was an ambiguous mix of odours and hygiene routines interrupted by travel. Her airline uniform was shapely and beyond merely tailored to fit. Unlike the other hostesses who really only looked like they were wearing a uniform, she looked as if she was dressed to impress. I'd fought the temptation to admire her breasts as she'd leaned over me to deliver my on-board meals, but I hadn't previously noticed her eyes. Now those eyes beckoned me with a bewitching sexuality. Entranced, I made a bee-line for her in the back seat of the cab.

Her name was Faye, 'Fanny' to her friends. Now sober enough to resist any quips at her nickname, I didn't repel her advances. The clichés of sexual fire amongst the service industry, including as it seemed air hostesses, were well founded. The kissing and petting started immediately, and I was appreciative for my previously arranged express check-in at the hotel. Without it I was liable to violate local laws intended to ensure some levels of common decency were maintained.

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Sex was imminent; we both knew it and craved it. We managed to walk calmly to my room but once inside we shed our clothes recklessly and cast them where they lay. We fell to the bed and began to savage each other in some pre-penetration foreplay which lasted longer than seemed reasonable and realistic. I savoured the feel, the smell and the taste of her until the outside world beckoned.

The porter might have been knocking or waiting at the door for some time but I didn't notice; I was too engrossed. Then I suddenly noticed the simultaneous rings of the room phone, my own phone ringing from somewhere amid my clothing strewn on the floor between the door and the bed, and the polite persistence of the porter. He could have just left the suitcase, but clearly he wanted his tip or perhaps a look at what I was getting, based on the noises which must have been evident from the corridor.

I remember feeling strangely conflicted and stressed at the need to deal with the phones and to quickly get a grip on reality. Now an hour late for my 8am meeting, people weren't pleased. That the timing of that engagement given my flight's arrival was always going to be a stretch, even without my sordid dalliance, did not rate a mention and certainly wasn't going to mitigate any lateness on my part.

I answered the phones reluctantly but didn't bother to defend myself, offer any excuses or lie that my flight had been delayed. They wouldn't care, and for all I knew whoever had put the call directly through to my room may well have let it slip that I'd checked-in some time ago and surely I'd had enough time to shower and change. I didn't even shave, just re-dressed in the same dirty clothes I'd travelled in leaving Fanny reclining on my bed, fully expectant she wouldn't be there on my return.

When I saw myself in a mirror in the lift to the lobby, I was surprised. My clothes clearly had a lived-in look about them and I looked very much like someone who had travelled overnight, sleeping in the same clothes. If my sense of smell wasn't still temporarily shot from the dry pressurised air of the aircraft cabin, perhaps I might have smelled like a mix of alcohol and bodily fluids, but I didn't dwell on it. Instead, I focused on the way I presented myself. Beyond my dishevelled state, I liked what I saw.

Whether I could attribute how I looked to fatigue, stress or my long bottled indifference to my work and associated travel I'll never know, but I didn't see a messy, hung over, adulterous, struggling professional who was running late. Instead, I

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saw a man, brimming with such self confidence that he didn't need to waste any time on the mundanities of his life. This man was going to make those at the meeting wait because they ought to, and doing so allowed them time to contemplate the understated value of him. There was a presence about this man, an arrogance born of capability; he could do anything. It took me a while to acknowledge that this man, this man exuding power, was me.

I didn't rush to the meeting. My phone rang incessantly but I just let it ring and I settled myself for a decent coffee before casually hailing a cab for the short four block hop. Coffee in hand and surrounded by the City's hum, I anticipated my morning motivational call from my boss and thought about whether the presence of this man from the mirror would support me when she abused me for any or all of my many failings. When she didn't ring I wondered if the man from the mirror ever worried.

I wondered for a time if my clients saw what I did when I strutted across the lobby of their conference room. They talked among themselves as I approached and I sensed their aggravation, unimpressed that a consultant for whom they were paying a fortune would keep them waiting, but before they could say anything something came over me and I brazenly launched into an assault on them, "Care to tell me why you won't let me finish my coffee in peace?".

They looked at each other with a look of bewilderment that transcended our cultural divides. "I'll start when I'm ready," I scolded, labouring the point while they were taken aback. They were silenced by my front and the mood eased a little, but something in the back of my mind wondered whether my façade would withstand any committed scrutiny.

They escorted me to a vacant desk with some reluctance while an interpreter reiterated my brief and what they expected me to achieve, adding a little quip that I should try to work 'full' days if it wasn't too much trouble. Resting my jacket on the back of my chair, I settled in for the familiar tedium of another day of picking holes in the way the company operated until I caught another glimpse of my reflection on the screen. A different person looked back at me; I could see it in everything about me. There was a bizarre fluidity in way I moved, there was acuity in my thinking and each breath from me felt like it was clean exhaust from a fusion reactor. Attributing this person to the result of tired eyes, I rubbed my face and when I looked again I only saw myself.

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I set to work until my mind drifted a little. I thought of how my contacts had seemed good humoured, particularly with my professional arrogance, but then I felt as if this was just a passive friendly air and a darker more militant reaction was in the winds. On several occasions my mind tricked me into feeling the vibration of an incoming call, but on looking my phone showed no sign of anything, missed or pending. This was surely a bad sign, most probably that my boss was en-route to deal with me personally, and these affable clients were just biding their time before ultimately they'd have the last laugh. Taking travel time into consideration I figured I might well need to wait until the following morning before I could really be sure if my concerns were warranted.

Despite being fuelled by my potential, I found myself driven partially by obligation to perform and stress for consequences of failure and how my boss would respond and my initial tardiness. Focussing on the task at hand, it was as if the planets came into alignment as I became a man apart. By early afternoon I'd finished what I'd travelled many frequent flyer miles to achieve. What had been estimated to take two weeks, and not by any miscalculation, deliberate or otherwise, I had completed in a little over four hours. As I worked I felt the presence of regular employees, mere ordinary mortals, come and go, each looking over my shoulder to watch me work. They watched the blur of my hands over the keyboard and the incessant flashes of productivity evidenced on the screen and shook their heads in disbelief. The clients were in awe, and I was more than a little impressed with my achievement too. Soon I was doing little more than housekeeping, wiping dust from the desk and ordering the selection of stationery in the drawers. Frustrated at being in a position I didn't recall ever having been in before, I found some paperwork to complete and then made a list of everything else which could be done while on-site; the 'as opportunity' tasks for which I never got an opportunity. Then I completed everything on the list.

Admittedly, I was in Asia, but I was surprised when one of the heavy hitters in the client organisation bowed his head slowly when he had some occasion to visit. He had clearly been well briefed on what I had achieved and perhaps he came to see for himself. His entourage was large which, correctly or not, emphasised his importance to them if not to me. As buoyed as my spirits were, it was possible I could have misinterpreted a neck flinch as a subtle bow, but there was no mistaking the exaggerated almost cowering bow of his followers. *En masse* their conduct made me feel like I was royalty.

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Far from discounting their praise or similarly deriding myself, I took it all and revelled in their adulation. Before I knew it, I was discussing everything else I'd identified as being wrong with and in their organisation, beyond what I'd fixed myself in the short time I had available. Speaking with such clinical clarity and precision, soon I was asked to present my findings in a more appropriate setting. They wanted to use a larger conference room, this time on the top floor.

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At another time I would surely have deferred my involvement to someone else. My boss would argue that this was necessary on account of my inherent ineptitude, but the man in the mirror didn't need the support or concurrence of anyone, my boss in particular. I caught a glimpse of him again in the elevator to the executive level, barely large enough for the gathering entourage. He, I actually looked better than I had before. My clothes had not improved but my outlook as visible in my eyes was indescribable. Had I been a professional athlete I would have been seen as being in 'the zone'; focussed on a purpose and oblivious to anything beyond the playing field.

With original masterpieces on the walls and a seamless sheet of floor to ceiling glass behind a massive mahogany table, this was an appropriate setting for me to present to the cream of the company and a full house at that. No sooner had the big boss arrived that I launched into my straight off the cuff presentation. I didn't ease into my spiel with pleasantries or niceties or even small-talk, I just started. Within the first ten minutes I was stopped for no other reason than their want to bolster their audience with a greater number of translators and to enable their audio-visual team to start recording. They apologised profusely for the delay and did their best to offer distractions of food and drinks. They explained that many of their tiers of management were not as capable with the English language as they would have liked. More correctly, it was the CEO himself who did the apologising in perfect, Oxford University educated English, much to the head bowed shame of many of his staff.

When at last I was given the nod to continue, I started with a recap on what little I had already covered. My throat lubricated with a neat single malt Scotch and my blood sugar level elevated with smoked salmon and fine cheeses, I was on fire. I spoke completely devoid of humility as if oblivious to any cultural expectations that I should moderate my opinions. At first the translators faltered a little, a point which I initially attributed to their being unable to find the correct local language equivalent to capture my intent. It eventually became apparent that the CEO was keen to ensure that the translators did not soften any rhetorical body blows into something culturally amenable. He wanted his people to hear it the way I saw it. After speaking non-stop