

# SUNDRIES

*thoughts*  
*words*  
*images*

*by*

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## *About the wind*

There is no wind in a hot air balloon, as the balloon is travelling at the same speed as the wind. All is still. I learnt this fact when reading about the Andrée Expedition, the Swedish attempt to reach the North Pole by helium balloon. Needless to say, it did not go down well.

I think about the wind in Malmö. Often. Not just the wind, the weather in general. Wind changes my mood. The wind has been up this week, and it is on my mind.

I think about these windless balloon trips when I am cycling. Malmö is very flat, and even with rows of apartment buildings crowding your peripheral vision, lining the streets, there is a lack of shelter from the wind. Each street becomes a wind tunnel.

*Cyclists barrel pell-mell down one side, the 'medvind' pushing at their backs like the arms of a dad pushing a child higher and faster and higher on a swing. On the other side, those battling with the 'motvind' are hunched over down in first gear, each pedal rotation an exhausting effort, the only thought running through their heads being*  
*"why aren't I going the other way?"*

The library where I work is on the top floor of a long 5 story building, which sits on a pier down by the harbour like a berthed cruise ship. I lunch outside by the water every day. But where I lunch is dictated by the wind. The building acts as a wind shield. Before lunch I do a round of the library to monitor the wind direction from the fluttering flags visible through the floor to ceiling windows.

I never used to think about the wind much in Auckland. It was there, or it wasn't. Perhaps it didn't seem so penetrating, slicing its way between upturned collars and tightly wrapped scarfs, up sleeves, that unfortunate gap between where the end of your cuff doesn't quite meet the edge of your gloves, and right through stockings if your denier isn't high enough. Wind chill is a serious business.

It will catch you unawares. My apartment is a double glazed concrete walled box. The wind doesn't howl here. I watch the trees arch, street lamps buckle, through my cinema screen window like a silent film. Flags whip back and forth like towels in a locker room. Flags are popular. But thermometers more so.

I check the temperature obsessively. Compare the actual temperature to the 'feels like' temperature. (I feel that the 'feels like' temperature is a blatant lie.) Compare indoor and outdoor temps, temperature in the sun to temperature in the shade. Thermometers are present in every Swedish home, often in more than one room. The double glazing on their windows is nearly impenetrable and Swedes are incredulous when I brazenly announce that New Zealand houses are *all made of wood and windows are single glaze and we are all hardy pioneering types who just put on an extra jersey and another 3 pairs of socks when the winter comes, mate.*

Swedish homes are at least 20 degrees all year round. Without your thermometer you wouldn't know it was -5 outside with a wind chill of -12, until it was too late and you had already left the relative shelter of your apartment's courtyard and been whisked away on your bike by a swift tail wind that whistled shrilly through your spokes and pinched your exposed ears.

*April 11, 2014. Current temperature: 10 degrees. Feels like: 10 degrees.  
No wind. We must be in a balloon.*



## SHUFFLING CARDS

I wonder if I am about to get my period. This feeling of moroseness usually preempts it.

Also, I have spent the past 4 day long weekend with a blocked nose and been in denial about it. Trying to get on with doing things. Perhaps this has finally started to run me into the ground.

I am slouching around my flat like a lost tourist. Or one of those clichés about a tiger in a cage or a prisoner in a cell. Whatever the metaphor, the feeling is there. Sloping around, stifled. Except I am not. There is nothing except my own feelings of listlessness and guilt keeping me inside. At 27, I am still unsure of how to be comfortable being by myself – or as I think of it, doing nothing.

I have a negative attitude towards doing nothing. Doing nothing, I can't relax. It doesn't feel ok to be lying in bed reading (in English, can't be bothered with Swedish tonight) a book I have read before (don't have the energy to focus on something new) for an hour or so on a Monday evening. How is it that I have lost the ability to indulge in simple pleasures that I find relaxing? Since when have I started equating reading to doing nothing? And how do I undo these detrimental ways of thinking?

It all comes down to a sense of unfulfillment. Day after day of mundane drudgery, meaningless meetings, wasting time. About as creative as shuffling a pack of cards. The only way to change up day is to shuffle the tasks around a little.

Book processing in the morning, sorting newspapers before lunch, inter loans directly after lunch, round off the day with some book mending. Tomorrow, reverse that. Shuffle the cards. Rinse and repeat.

So have been my days for the last 3 years. Where does that leave me? Sooner or later one must break the cycle. I am too regimented in my ways, and I don't know if that suits me. I read somewhere it was bad to eat the same food every day. My lunch consists of a cheese, ham and cucumber sandwich and a can of coke and 3 cigarettes. Same thing, nearly every day. You stop thinking about small things. I think that acceptance of my situation has stunted me creatively. My creative thinking between the hours of 7:30 and 4:30 are at pretty much zero. If any occurs, it probably means I am not focused on the tasks I am being paid to complete.

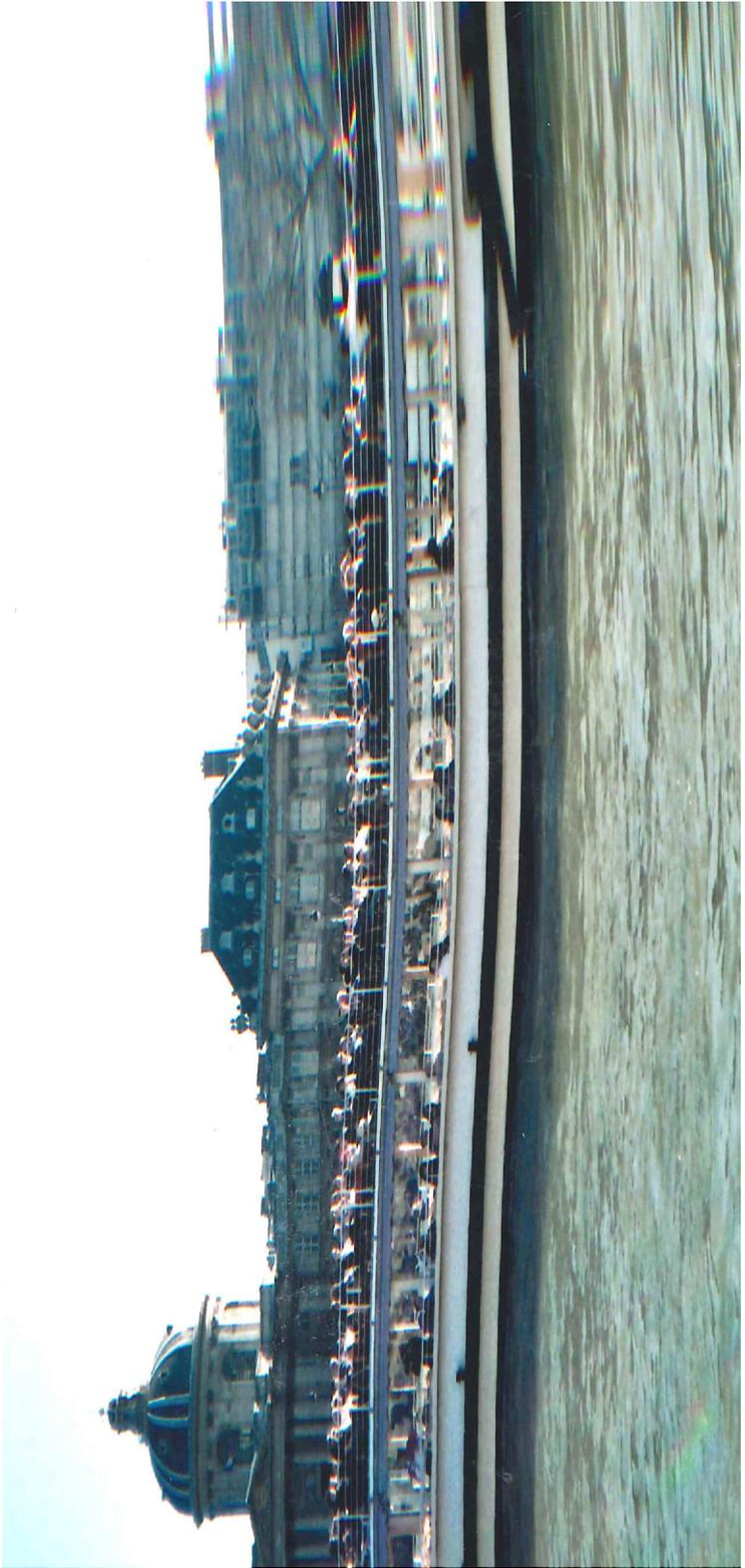
And yet, on the other hand, I feel like I am bundling together more avenues of exploration than ever before, like gathering up large quantities of laundry with stray socks falling through my arms. Bundles of ideas in their most organic stages – disorganized, haphazard, I am unsure what to do with them. How are they to be arranged? Which ideas go together?

Sometimes it feels like I don't have time to figure this out.

I once heard of a boy who shuffled decks of cards by throwing them on the floor and picking them up one by one. This is what I need to do. Except leave some of the cards on floor, and hopefully find some aces someone has stealthily hidden up their sleeves when I wasn't looking.

I am the master of half-baked ideas. Right now I am sitting at my desk surrounded by scraps of paper blu-tacked to the wall, detailing installations, art works, furniture designs, textile patterns. They never really get off the page. I never really learnt any skills with which to help me realize what I had thought up. Couldn't really follow through.

After some advice from my father I have started to write things down. Change direction to find a new creative edge he said. Maybe it is better if I keep things on the page. These are just thoughts and words. A beginning of a collection of other thoughts and words. After that, maybe things can begin to flow more naturally. And maybe after all these years I will finally be able to live up with my name and just



# LOOKING FOR THE

# HOOK

ramble ramble ramble /

small anecdote / wry observation / something I heard from TV  
/ colloquialism / appropriated cliché / chandler-esque simile /  
adjective-heavy description / attempt to be witty /  
the same thing written in different ways  
short paragraphs and unfinished sentences

then going off to do something else for a while  
a while being an undetermined period of time  
letting the same thing written in different ways to settle  
fester

until I stumble across the hook  
patiently lying in wait where/when I'm least expecting it  
the catchy part of the song which ties all the strands, all these same things written in diffe-  
rent ways  
together into nice knots  
from the Ashley Book of

That's what I am trying to say.



Having reached 27, my hair is already at a level of greyness which could be classified as 'salt and pepper'. When I was younger this used to cause me a fair amount of concern, but not anymore.

I would stare into the bathroom mirror, sifting through the strands to try to rustle out the wiry offenders unsuccessfully attempting to blend into the crowd. But there is safety in numbers, and as the grey hairs gathered a following, my resolve to individually pluck out the stragglers weakened, laziness dissolved into acceptance, and finally transformed into a certain sense of identity, even personality.

I like the way they shimmer, dancing in and out of the bland brown strands, adding character to generally acknowledged unremarkable features. Like wearing a patterned shirt. This is why I will never dye my hair.

When studying at art school, I worked part-time as a library assistant at the art school's library. It was here one day a colleague helpfully drew to my attention a long streak of white paint in my hair. It was only after a consultation with my reflection in the bathroom mirror that I could inform Tom that his streak of paint was in fact my streak of grey hairs, curling like a wisp of cigarette smoke behind my ear.

## GREY HAIRS & COMMERCIALS.

An aunt of mine went completely grey by the age of 30. As having only known her after the age of 30, and therefore completely grey, I am unsure if 30 was in fact the age at which the greyness became complete. This threat hung over my childhood and teenage years.

*"You know, Julie was grey by the time she was 30."*

How long will it be before the grey wins out over the brown I wonder. 35? 40? The battle of my scalp. The shifting sands of time of Days of Our Lives. Sometimes I think I will wake up to discover my hair has turned completely grey overnight, like Leland Palmer's, and I won't be surprised.

After rain, they curl up halo-like on the crown of my head. Like water and oil separating.

They seem to break easily, always shorter than the majority. The short straw. Their prominence depends on my hair's parting. Sometimes I effect a sort of comb-over, and they are mostly obscured, a female bald spot. I loathe to cover them up, mask them, but I am under the impression that a side parting suits me better. I check on the greys progression in their gradual take over every morning.

No noticeable change.

*"It won't happen overnight, but it will happen"*, mouths Rachel Hunter.

Except she wasn't talking about grey hairs. Though it was something to do with shampoo, if I remember the ad correctly. And to quote another New Zealand TV commercial - Good things take time.

In that one, they were talking about cheese.



It's the end of April and Kjell is moving in with me in a month's time. Since we met he has lived in a 25m<sup>2</sup> one room bachelor pad-cum-student digs above a supermarket, with two stove ranges, a bar fridge and no oven. The apartment building lies on a narrow, pot-holed, arterial street which was until recently the main thoroughfare for the majority of the city's buses into town, passing with a collective rumbling over the uneven asphalt under his 3 windows, generously caked with rain spotted grime, forcing Kjell to keep the windows closed and the built-in venetian blinds nearly always down.

Furniture runs around the walls like skirting board, shoulder to shoulder. Bed, a table with books, a speaker with a tv resting atop, a table with record player and amp, a speaker without a tv, the exercycle, couch, clothes stand, chair, in that order, a long coffee table in the centre creating a sort of spiraling effect.

Its size is almost comical - the kitchen tucked around a corner like an excuse; the bathroom wash basin in the shower cubicle and the bed the first thing visible from the front door. Last weekend 6 friends from Uppsala crashed in the apartment, the floor awash with mattresses, and no one thought to share the double bed.

By the time summer had rolled around, the room felt hot, stifling. The sound of the buses deterred any inclination to leave the windows open, and sunlight would pick out speckles of dust on the venetian blinds. The half-hearted idea of purchasing an electric fan never amounted to anything more than a 'sex fan' running joke. Hibernation was over, it was time to get outside.

## MOVES

Dabbed around the room are casual splashes of orange complimenting the richly stained teak furniture and black leather of the couch: a plastic orange bowl rests high up on string shelves; one half of a set of curtains hangs idly against the wall in a hazy swirl of psychedelic oranges and reds - a first strip of wall paper in a redecoration never completed. An orange and white lampshade hangs from the ceiling and infuses the small space with a tent-like warmth. The 1960's plastic orange scoop chair that the cat curls up on when she visits.

Kjell's place is best in winter. Perfect for weekend hibernations, a den-like love nest, and only sporadic forays outside to forage at the supermarket, or dashes across the road to pick up pizza shakes us out of our bed head reverie. We spend most of time in lounging on the couch or in the bed, the duvet rallied back and forth between the two focal points of apartment, while we skip the few steps between each island, cold bare feet on the faux parquet floor.

The confines of the space encourages constant companionship, which is just how we want it, getting to know each other. There is a physicality present dictated by the size, the bed and the couch being the only places to sit, we are nearly always side by side. Knees touching, arms flung over shoulders or wrapped around waists; heads on shoulders. Always in speaking range, almost always in sight.

Falling in love nearly always bears some connection to a specific place. In this flat is the start of our relationship. Eating and drinking like teenagers, chips and falafel and cheap beer, cigarettes out the window while our cheeks redden, trading pop culture knowledge, and song selections on Spotify. On the couch, we re-watch Bond films and then try to outdo each other with obscure pieces of trivia while I laugh at Swedish Bond titles. We lie in bed checking facts on Wikipedia, in an effort to impress the other party, slipping into the competitiveness that inadvertently emerges when one begins to fall in love.

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We spent weekends at Kjell's place as my flat was an empty shell – a gallery before an exhibition. The white walls gave off a washed out, expectant feel, as if they had stood empty for years and it was about time somebody did something about it. I blu-tacked an old birthday card, my 11 year old brother's attempt at the sleeve of Sgt Pepper's, on the wall and left everything else rubbing shoulders with the skirting board. Frames and mirrors still lean ambiguously against the walls, not yet hung or just taken down, it isn't clear.

The floor plan is a wonky zig zag – none of the walls are at right angles to each other. The kitchen is off to the left, flush with the front door and receives so much sweltering afternoon sun I only eat salads in the summertime. A dim hallway ducks around a corner and opens up with sharp sunlight into the sparsely furnished large main room to face two windows, of which only one opens. The windows fill the wall like a cinema screen and are adorned with two sets of black metal venetian blinds I amateurishly installed myself, perhaps two months after I moved in. Before the blinds I would sleep wearing my travel eye mask until the dawn sun announced itself like a hangover.

I sourced two desks, and positioned them at right-ish angles to each other in what I jokingly dubbed my "craft corner". I allow myself some self-deprecation. Soon scraps of ideas began to climb the walls, vying for space. Drawings, sketches, miscellaneous phrases. Photographs, posters and postcards. Looking around, I can see everything I had been thinking about, doing, where I had been. A security blanket of self. Draped over an armchair hangs the blanket my grandmother knitted for me over 15 years ago, which I sent for after my previous boyfriend broke up with me. I sit on it while working on an endless project of knitting fishing line which splays out along the floor like a wedding train and slowly inches into to centre of the room with every row stitched. I look around at my ideas, think about them and knit some more line.

I initially thought this place was small. Empty apartments are misleading. The more furniture I acquired, the larger the space felt, as if the walls were trying to be accommodating. My possessions are still relatively few, after 4 years of living in Sweden, and 18 months in this apartment with dedicated weekly trawls of the six second hand shops in the area. All the possessions are on a small scale, suitcase-sized; books, records, drawings, knick-knacks and bric-a-brac, clumped together (in what I consider to be a considered manner) on the available window sills, table tops, a few shelves. Is this a carry-over from a sense of relocation – a feeling that one's life can be packed up and unpacked on the other side of the world?

This is my last week living in this apartment – this apartment as it looks now. This physical manifestation of my interior, living for one. This weekend is the last hurrah. Stag night. Kjell moves in next Saturday, and is out of town for the next few days. This weekend, I am spending time alone in this apartment. Writing, thinking, making art, eating, drinking, waking up, filling a space. Funny how things work out that way – read too much into it and you think it means more than just a collection of happenstance occurrences lined up next to each other.

I have promised to take down everything from the walls. So we can return to that washed out, expectant feel, and do something about it together.



THINGS I HAVE BEEN  
WONDERING ABOUT  
LATELY –

*mechanical pencils*

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It was while I was washing my hair that I started thinking about mechanical pencils. I had my face turned upwards towards the shower head and felt the pressurized water pelt me like steady volleys of .5 lead. Graphite greying strands of hair that had loosened from scalp whilst lathering twisted through my fingers and I smeared them on the tiled shower walls. It seems I am losing more hairs with every wash, every brush stroke, every comb through. On average one loses 127 strands of hair a day. I look at the tiled walls. Is this more than 127 strands?

As a teenager, I mainly hung out in Mid City. Mid City was an arcade, housing a now abandoned cinema, a dozen or so shops which rarely lasted more than a few months, a games arcade in the basement and escalators which were always out of commission. The interior as I remember it was some form of white tile, which had devolved into that dirty grey of old snow from the grime pedestrians had repeatedly tramped in from the streets outside, spreading like mould across the floor. The sushi place in the Elliot St end always smelled of piss due to its location next to a garage appropriated as a urinal for homeless people and the drunk students from the backpackers bar around the corner. We didn't eat there. I saw Grease in the cinema on a school trip when they screened it on the occasion of the film's 20th anniversary. That was 1998.

Mid City was primarily known amongst my age group as a mecca for Asian stationery. The stores were cramped, over-stocked capsules, only the large number of Tarepanda, Dorae-mon, Kogepan and Afro Ken soft toys worked to protect the more delicate wares from our swaying, text-book laden backpacks, which we wore low, bouncing off our arses, as was the style back then.

The stationery was beautiful. The height of teenage luxury and sophistication. Gel pens of every imaginable colour, lined up in rows like paint swatches. Anime and manga character erasers, rulers, scissors, diaries; pastel notepads and scented envelopes adorned with nonsensical English, stationery I didn't even know what it was used for, only that I needed to have it.

In the clear-out before moving to Sweden, I discovered no less seven Mid City-Asian-stationery-store pencil cases stashed in various drawers. I sold them all at a garage sale.

I had been reading Murakami – that was why I was thinking of mechanical pencils in the shower while washing my hair. One possibly can't immediately see the correlation between Murakami and mechanical pencils, but the chain of thought was something as follows: Murakami – author - Japanese – writers in his books – writing characters – studying Japanese in high school – Japanese high school essays - mechanical pencils. This was all near-instantaneous however, and only hindsight has enabled the separation of the individual strains of thought to become apparent; the breakdown of the different links of my mind's Wikipedia.

I wondered if the mechanical pencils, the only pencil variety available at the Asian stationery shops of Mid City, were so popular because their tips were always uniform, always sharp. My worn pencils were blunted stubs, giving my handwriting a round, bloated feel, the lines' edges fuzzy iron filings. Mechanical pencils must be so popular because they are always sharp, the lines always crisp, I reasoned. Perfect for Kanji, hiragana, katakana characters. Different characters are made up of a different amount strokes. But regardless of the complexity of the character, the box to write in is always the same. Sharp pencils, essential.

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In regards to the complexity of certain characters, here are some hard facts. The Kanji dá is the most complex character able to be put into a computer and comprises of 48 individual strokes. A Japanese kanji character, (otodo/taito/daito) is made up of 84 strokes. Both characters mean “the appearance of a dragon in flight”. Comprising of multiple cloud characters and repeated dragon characters, it describes exactly what it means. Animation cells layered on top of each other, as the dragon slowly makes his way through the clouds, across the sky.

How would I use ‘the appearance of a dragon in flight’? I struggle to come up with an appropriate simile. My experiences witnessing flying dragons are pretty much zero – actually zero if you disregard the numerous dragons of popular culture. How a dragon would appear in flight would be highly dependent on the nature of the dragon, I realised. I keep thinking of Puff (the magic one) and Falkor.

I stop to smoke a cigarette out the window in order to think about this, scanning my environs in search of something to which I could describe as having the appearance of a dragon in flight. Dusty Springfield is on the record player, and I start believing that ‘The Windmills of your Mind’ sounds like a dragon in the air: the undulating melody, Dusty's husky voice dipping and gliding, the string instruments climbing high and sinking slowly like the sun at dusk on Sweden's summer nights.

Across the road I see a pennant fluttering sedately in the half breeze, the tail idly circling the flag pole. It is the day before Midsommar and the city is nearly deserted. The sky is grey, the clouds heavy and low. A freak gust of wind barrels through the channel of houses where the flag pole stands, dislodging the pennant, and carries it high up into the clouds. Blue and yellow strips twist through the air, having an appearance of a dragon in flight, in search of lively conversation and warmer climes.



# ALBATROSS – HOW I GET AROUND.

I've decided to not return to NZ until Harriet's wedding. This conclusion was reached on a bleak winter's day in Malmö, the temperature nudging zero and me sitting outside on my lunch break eating my regulation ham, cheese & cucumber sandwich. I lunch outside every day, regardless of the weather, in order to indulge in a couple of cigarettes and read unhindered by the high-pitched recounting of baby anecdotes, the most popular topic of conversation in the staff room. Having a cigarette in silence sometimes makes me forget I am in Sweden. Especially in winter. The temperature in NZ would have been in the mid-20's. I might have been swimming. Not the best thing to be thinking about while gazing at graffiti-paint grey water. I am not even planning on returning during summer, when I do return. Feijoa's aren't in season in the summer. It has been over four years since I ate a feijoa. Feijoas do not exist in Sweden. Neither as a word or a fruit.

"We aren't going to NZ this year," I announce to Kjell, decisively but with a vague tinge of disappointment.

"Wait, so no Hobbiton? No Nippon Clip-ons?"

Even though I have told Kjell many times I am not going to Hobbiton with him, and that no one in NZ ever calls the Auckland Harbour Bridge the 'Nippon Clip-on' he refuses to accept the fact of either one of these statements.

We watched a documentary about the bridge from NZ on Screen and now he thinks he knows everything.

They will still be there next year, I say.

Next year is the vague date for the wedding. I am half-heartedly holding my thumbs that Hobbiton is destroyed in a freak landslide or conveniently struck by lightning.

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I like a city where it's easy to get around. "I have never caught a taxi in Sweden," I say proudly, employing the same tone I use when announcing that I have never bought a Subway sub (foot-long or 6 inch). A few weeks ago it was the first time in my life I ever ordered a coffee. This only happened because the café was out of homemade lemonade, which I actually wanted, so in a bizarre form of punishment, (meted out to the café or myself, I am still unsure) I ordered a coffee, the last thing I wanted. When everyone was seated with their beverages in front of them I admitted that I had never before ordered a coffee, and have drunk coffee on only two known occasions in my life. Astounded, everyone took a photo for posterity: myself, awkward with cup of coffee in hand, unsure of whether to smile or grimace. These photos were not for sharing, but taken only as a reassurance of this event having taken place.

In the end, it was a slightly anti-climactic experience: the taste wasn't as bad as I suspected, no spitting out of coffee in disgust, no retching, no exaggerated shudders. The only problem is, buying a coffee in a café no longer falls under the list headed 'Things I have never done that most other people have done, which weirds them out a little'.

Interestingly, the statement that arouses most disbelief from that list is having never caught a taxi in Sweden.

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The freedom of travelling off your own steam is a luxury. When cycling, I am reminded of the sensation Robert Pirsig describes in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, gliding down American highways on his bike. I never listen to music when I cycle. I can't understand why anyone would want to.

I am 27 and cannot drive. At 18, I went to sit the theory test for my learner's licence and failed the prerequisite eye-test before answering a single question. They initially thought the machine was malfunctioning. I got glasses, but I never went back. We used to gently mock mum for not learning to drive until she was 25.

Driving does not loom large in my future as a means of transport. Not only did I switch from four wheel transportation to two upon my relocation to Sweden, I switched from left to right sided traffic. Drive on the left, cycle on the right.

As a cricket player I bowled with my left hand but batted as a right hander. Left arm slow-medium pace - I was all about line and length - right hand forward defense with the occasional cut past backward point. It's all in the wrists. I am not ambidextrous, just left-handed with a few ambiguities.

I can't drive in Sweden, and I can't cycle in New Zealand. Both would be the wrong way round.

*A bike ride.*

On Saturday it was warm. Warm enough a jersey wasn't necessary. I found a pair of binoculars at an op shop – khaki green, rubber, possibly ex-Swedish army. Kjell and I cycled out to a large park on Malmö's northern outskirts, originally the site of Malmö's airport before they closed it down and built a new airport further away.

Copenhagen's airport is closer. Strange to think that the city's nearest airport is in a different country.

We took the scenic route, as in the long way round, the route itself hardly qualifying as scenic. Through an industrial area of low rise factory buildings in varying drab shades of grey, off-white, and worn brick, with that metallic sheen on the windows that doesn't let you see inside.

The park is on the other side of the motorway and we are uncertain how to get over. "I see the Big Chair!" Kjell says, and we motion towards it, relieved that XXX Lutz decided to build a monstrous red chair the size of a 2 storey apartment building outside of their store, an icon of Sweden's kitset furniture mentality. XXX Lutz is another Ikea-ish company, and resides where the old Ikea used to be, before it moved to a new mega-store in an area surrounded by other mega-stores. The Big Chair leads us to the park, and to Malmö's highest (only) peak.

Malmö's highest (only) peak was, up until the day before yesterday, unnamed, when Dad christened it Mt Florence on Facebook chat. It is not very high, a hill at a stretch, so quite suited to such a falsely grandiose title. We wheel our bikes up the slope, my shoes are not my most practical, but I don't slip. The grass is that non suburban grass that is only seen on farms, in fields and on hills: dry, hardy, yellowing tufts.

The 360 degree vista is the washed out yellowy haze of an Instagram filter. The binoculars work brilliantly once you get the focus right and close one eye, otherwise the separate lenses fail to match up correctly – the image is blurred and smudged as if a greasy thumbprint has swiped across the glass. Great purchase, as usual.

I realise I can see all the way to my flat. I spy the water tower, affectionately nicknamed Kuken by Malmö residents, situated around the corner and the twin turrets of the building across the road. In terms of nicknames for structures resembling other things, 'Kuken' must be right up there. Kuken means 'The Cock', and the unfortunate semblance of an erect brick phallus topped with greened copper is lost on no one.

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Over here and over there. That is what the two different sides of the world are called in my head. Connected by one of those arching lines you see on aeroplanes between the point of departure and the destination. When I picture this arc in my head I hear Fleetwood Mac's song Albatross. Albatross is the only song I have heard that really captures the sleek unhurried glide and a faint quivering in the atmosphere that comes with watching something travel across the sky. Kites, birds, jet streams trailing off into the distance. Balloons.

I have been listening to a lot of Christine Perfect lately. Perfect was Christine's name until she married John and became Christine McVie and joined Fleetwood Mac. I wish she had kept Perfect. Maybe she had the same problem I do with Wild – convincing people it's your real name.

Dad told me the story many years ago, when, as young Bruce in 1969, he stayed up all night, the radio disc jockey having promised to play the latest single by the hard hitting British Blues band Fleetwood Mac. (Fleetwood Mac the original incarnation. Before Lindsay Buckingham and Stevie Nicks). He was anticipating another 'Black Magic Woman' – heaving blues with Peter Green's wailing, echoing guitar played loud.

But Fleetwood Mac's latest single was Albatross. 40 years after the fact, it still seems he hasn't quite gotten over the disappointment – he still doesn't like the song. Perhaps it spelt out the beginning of the end of the Mac as he knew it. I am not going back to NZ this year. I went to Paris in March and will be going to Rome in June. It is cheaper to fly to Paris than to train to Stockholm. This is how people travel over here.



# THE ROMANCER

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The first I saw were his feet. Scuffed black cross-trainers with black rubber soles, black laces, about as normcore as you can get, except this guy would have no idea what normcore was. I guessed mid 30's, my eyes travelling up from the black sneakers to the uncuffed mid-wash jeans, straight leg, the type of jeans purchased by someone for whom 'jeans' means purely denim trousers, completely unconcerned. Untucked white shirt, but with those distinct creases still visible on the sleeves where he had ironed it before he left the house.

I started at his feet because I was staring down at him from a second storey window, and he wasn't upright in the first place. His legs were splayed like a gunslinger's stance across the two steps leading into the arched entrance of the apartment building over the street, his bottom half exposed in the searing afternoon sunlight; from waist up covered in the muddy curving shadow cast by the arch. The steps and entrance way had originally been cream, but through a combination of mud, cigarette ash, spilt and emptied soft drink and beer bottles, dog shit, vomit and urine it now resembled the grey brown smears of many Friday and Saturday nights. As I watched him lying in that filth I imagined the back of his once ironed white shirt slowly darkening, staining like the mold did on the mattresses that time the basement flooded, intermingling with the yellow discolouration of sweat. He must smell by now, not that he seemed aware of his surroundings; eyes closed.

I had no idea how long he had been lying there – passers-by meandered along as if he was a napping dog. I looked out, he was there. It felt as if now he was merely another part of the scenery, another mannequin in a shop window. Just browsing, thanks. A sauntering youth – grey track pants, white singlet showing off gym-toned muscles and a tan too premature to have been natural – pauses and whips out his phone, sniggering, he signals to his friends as he films the black sneakers lol from the left to the right and back again. Society and the spectacle.

Still clutched in his right hand – the petals from this angle looking a little worse for wear – a crushed, beginning to wilt, bouquet of red roses. The clear cellophane wrapping creased, his right arm thrown out across the tiles in a gesture of complete despondency – as if to fling the bouquet as far away from him as possible – unconscious of it still being firmly fastened in his limp-wristed grip. Unconscious of his surroundings, unconscious of being filmed, unconscious of his forgotten bouquet; unconscious due to the large bottle of whiskey nestled in the crook of his left arm like a lullaby – three quarters empty at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon. It can't have gone well.

He must have had expectations; certainly great things appeared to be on the horizon. The roses, the ironed shirt, the tidy jeans all said so. He had made an effort, and how many people can be said to do that these days? I imagine him preparing for his rendezvous, taking his time with his appearance, the grooming, the presentation. Everything considered, picked out in advance: least sporty looking sports shoes (the only style he owns), shirt painstakingly pressed, sleeves first, the way Mum showed him over twenty years ago when he started spending his Sunday nights ironing of a weeks' worth of school shirts. His nicest pair of jeans. Proper shower, deodorant, aftershave, nose hairs and fingernails trimmed, ears cleaned. Hair brushed, shoulders back. Putting in the effort.

Two lines from The Kinks' 'When I See That Girl of Mine' circle in my head like a mantra as I indulge in my daydream of The Romancer's toilette.

*"Getting ready and looking my best  
Got to look my best so I'm taking my time"*

These two simple lines now seem to contain a sort of deep profundity bound up inside them. Such positivity, barely concealed excitement, full of promise. Where was the time now?

I looked down with a feeling of kinship sadness for this impossibly dejected figure and where he had ended up. I too wanted to clasp my near empty whiskey bottle and cast aside my dozen roses in melodramatic defeat, a silent film ingenue whose overblown gestures portray that disparaging heartbreak to end all heartbreak which happens without sound.

It seemed as if with his rejection (for obviously, there was some sort of rejection) he was destined to emulate the familiarly trod route of every teen movie; of every cliché, every soothing reassurance from your mother: "other fish in the sea, just need to get to know you, it's what's on the inside that counts", and half of all pop songs ring hollow and false and in that instant he knows it's all bullshit, the good guy won't get the girl in the end, instead he will be drowned in his sorrows on a stoop outside Asia House, a restaurant no one ever dines in but which is full of regular daytime drinkers as spectres of times to come, and with a jock gleefully filming his final demise for the whole damn world to see.

Here was the character of the 'nerd', the guy who won't get the girl personified. No longer a random stranger in a comically pathetic situation but every unpopular teenager's nightmare lying in the street like a warning. The earnestness of his appearance coupled with the fantastically clichéd props – the bouquet of roses in cheap cellophane – flower heads pointed to the ground, the bottle of Jim Beam – three quarters empty and gripped passionately around the neck; added to the bizarre surreality of the encounter: of course the roses were red; naturally it was Jim Beam. Otherwise how could it be true?

Watching the Romancer, I believe I lost a bit of my faith in humanity that day. Clichés are like tarot cards, mapping out preconceived instances by which ones subconsciously navigates paths mistakenly considered to be independent choices, products of free will. The Romancer couldn't see the signs, couldn't disrupt the natural flow of clichés paving the way to his own rejection. The flowers. The booze. The town shirt. The getting shit-faced and passing out on a stoop. Unconsciously being filmed by someone symbolizing everything he is not. All he can ask himself, is 'where did I go wrong?' Did he end up getting his happy ending – remembered all his mother told him? The last I saw of him he was trying to sit up with two of the seasoned Asia House regulars offering to help him polish off the remnants of his Jim Beam.

*"Hey do you remember that broken-hearted dude with the red roses and the Jim Beam sprawled on the steps across from your old apartment?"  
"Yeah. I actually still think of him sometimes y'know. I think he was one of the saddest things I have ever seen."  
"Mm, I think so too."*