

Road to Japan

Part 1:

I Hate Flying

The decision to move roughly 11, 000 km away from home was made almost entirely on a whim. Getting that far, however, is directly linked to how totally fatalistic I become as I board an airplane. As I walk down those long, cramped ramps, am cheerfully directed to my seat, and buckle myself in I never fail to sigh and think, “Well, it’s been a good run. But now you’re going to die.”

I think that I can almost be excused this morbid mindset from time to time. For example, when you’re sitting on the tarmac for over an hour, and several glances out the window reveal an increasing number of men in orange vests staring gravely at the wing, shrugging and pointing. Or, mid-flight, when the flight attendants do their very best to calm you during turbulence so wicked you feel like you’ve been stuck into a paint mixer by offering you copious amounts of free beer and wine, their smiles becoming, molar by molar, more fixed and strained. Or when you have to take off in the middle of one of the worst blizzards of the decade.

I’ve faced all these things.

I come from New Brunswick, an entire province of Canada so tragically overlooked by the rest of the world that I have, on numerous occasions, been asked what state that it is in.

No, the New Brunswick I’m talking about is definitely in Canada. And if there is one thing that everyone understands about Canada (and indeed sometimes it feels like

it is the only thing that is understood about Canada – apart from the fact that it is really big) is that it is cold in the winter. A type of cold that feels like a betrayal of the beauty around you; I suppose that's why conditions from November to early April are frequently described as treacherous.

In February 2009, Fredericton New Brunswick was in top form for keeping up this icy reputation. People cross-country skied down the snow-packed sidewalks to work; buses slid backwards down frozen hills as wide-eyed passengers mentally willed the vehicle onwards and upwards; and school children everywhere celebrated the unprecedented number of cancellation days by festively slinging the biggest chunks of ice they could find at each other's faces.

I normally love a good snow storm. But at this particular time, I instead I found myself staring, increasingly aghast, at the heavy and gusty swirls of snow rushing past the windows of the bookstore where I was working. I recall moving through the day, absentmindedly shelving and unshelving books, in a sort of dim horror as one truth lounged heavily on my mind: I have to catch a flight in the morning.

After work, I bundled up in my sheepskin coat and hat and trudged the hundred metres to my sisters' apartment, which sat above an overpriced jewellery store. Breanna, the second youngest in our quartet of sisters, was still up at the University, glaring (I imagine) at a Greek text that refused to translate itself. Kathleen, the eldest, was at home and buzzed me in from the street.

The over-bright hallway was nearly as cold as the road, and I could hear one of her insane Romanian neighbours yelling furiously at Larry King Live – the volume of

which was turned up so loud you could practically hear the news anchor's suspenders creak as he leaned full elbows on his desk.

"No! I told you to shut up! Be shutting up!" roared the furious woman.

"And we'll be talking with Bill Maher later this evening."

"All the time I hate you, Larry!"

Stomping my slush caked boots, I knocked. Kathleen opened the door.

"You have to fly to Montreal tomorrow," she said immediately, handing me a glass of wine.

"Uh-huh," I said, taking a large mouthful of merlot as I dusted the inch of snow from my shoulders, uncoiled my scarf, and peeled off my boots before shuffling over to the smaller of her two couches and flopping wearily onto it.

Clutching the newly opened bottle in one hand, a fresh glass for herself in the other, she stared at me for a moment as frustrated obscenities and cold air continued to drift in from the hallway. Sighing, she closed the door with her foot.

"Jesus," she said, and she poured herself a deep glass and returned to her couch. A thick sheet of paramedical textbooks and aggressively highlighted notebooks laid open there.

If there is one person who hates flying more than me, it is Kathleen. While I count myself in the order of people who liked flying as a child and grew to mysteriously hate it later, Kathleen has hated it from the beginning. Two years earlier we had taken a trip to Europe, backpacking around Ireland and the United Kingdom after I returned from a brief stint living in Slovenia. The day of our return to Canada, Kathleen had gripped my arm.

"I can't do it," she informed me, her lips pressed into a flat, white line of panic.

"Can't do what?"

"Get on the plane."

"That," I said, "is going to be problematic."

We decided in the middle of the monster that is Heathrow International Airport that what she had meant to say was that she could not get on the plane *sober*. This was not a difficult problem to remedy in the world's third-largest airport, if a little expensive. But we decided, being on the homestretch, that there really was no better way to spend our last few pounds. So after a couple of twelve dollar beers, and breaking into some of the mini-sized bottles of wine that are blessedly abundant in the United Kingdom, I was able to convince my considerably merrier eldest sister that waiting at our gate was now a fine idea.

Our flight was delayed, which caused her to panic slightly ("We have a faulty plane!") and induced her to, with alarming accurateness, quote several lines from the most recent Harry Potter movie. (We somehow managed to see it in every country we'd visited. It became a sort of bizarre personal challenge).

"Laura!" she said at full voice, once more seizing my arms.

"What?" I asked warily, glancing around at the swarm of strangers around us.

She looked at me firmly.

"Don't break ranks if one of us is killed."

"Oh Christ, please – "

"Enough of your bile!"

"I'll hit you. I'll do it, right in public and everything."

“But I’m bold as brass. Friend of Mudbloods and Blood-traitors alike – ow!”

She continued this impressive recital right onto the plane, and it didn’t help that somewhere mid-Atlantic we hit one of those pockets of turbulence that makes you forget that you are moving through thin air, not a boulder strewn road in Cambodia. We both looked into the wine situation; I could hardly let her drink alone. Sisters are good like that.

Now, back in Fredericton, as she could not be at the airport with me, she was returning the favour early.

“Well, you know the solution,” she said, clearing the table of her diagram of a child’s circulatory system. She lifted her glass and tipped it grimly.

“Wine won’t make the snow go away,” I said. I drained my glass and glowered at the beautiful, fat flakes filling the windowsill.

“Just don’t go,” she pressed. “Don’t. It’s not worth it.”

“If I miss this flight, I miss my interview.”

“Do you really want to go to Japan that bad?”

I looked around. “I think I do.”

She shrugged, and curled under her flannel blanket. “It will probably have blown over by tomorrow morning anyway,” she said bracingly.

I pulled the bottle my way, and topped off. “Probably.”

As a rule, I don’t get my hopes up. Disappointment is something that I truly can’t stand. I rather have teeth pulled. It means I am very rarely genuinely excited for things, but it also means that I very rarely experience that awful deflated sensation of your heart being punctured. This did not stop the sudden drop of my stomach, and the

feeling that I had become a hollow shell of myself when I woke the next morning and looked out my window.

The storm had not passed; it hadn't even ducked out for a moment to check the mail. The road was only in the vaguest sense plowed, and even as I watched with complete body-wracking horror a snowplow fishtailed down the street, its yellow light spinning with a sort of wild surprise.

Shaking, I reached for my phone to call a cab.

The taxi arrived over an hour later, but it did arrive. I made it to the bottom of my freezing apartment stairway, luggage banging on each step, opened the front door, and wondered why I had bothered at all. The drift was up to my neck.

The cab driver got out, and opened the back of the van, waving me on encouragingly between patting his arms down and peering down the road for rogue snowplow.

I closed my eyes and started a mantra. "I'm going to Japan. I'm going to Japan."

With this thought, I pushed through the snow, and – Huzza! It was only a drift, and not as long as it looked! It was still up to my hips but I wasn't quite swimming in it – which, I grasped at desperately, was something. Right?

"Where to?" asked the cabbie as he relieved me of my snow caked luggage.

"Airport, please," I said, brushing myself off as well as I could before climbing into the van's backseat. He gave me a long hard look as I slid the door shut. He looked like he wanted to ask if I was drunk or otherwise impaired, to which I would have responded with a bleak chuckle, "Oh, just give me an hour, sir." But he said nothing, and we started on our way.

Normally, it takes just half an hour to reach the airport from downtown Fredericton. While a growing and culturally vivid capital (a good place for poets, Leonard Cohen remarked as he began his set at Fredericton Playhouse Theatre), it is not a large city by any stretch. But with two University campuses, multiple colleges, and the one-time most populated high school in Canada (before it was divided in two), it is virtually flooded with students – and students like to get places. You can always catch a cab, and buses are dependable if somewhat infrequent. The people of Fredericton regularly lament the loss of the old train station, and I fervently counted myself amongst that number on this particular morning, as it would have kept me off the roads – a thing I thought we would end up doing involuntarily at any moment. The cab driver, miraculously skilled, still struggled to keep on the road. Visibility was almost zero (someone might have wrapped the entire vehicle in printer paper and I wouldn't have known the difference), and we arrived at the airport in a little over an hour, each of us stripped of at least one year of our life.

I tipped him ten dollars – half of my monthly disposable income at the time. Bookstore work, it turned out, was largely a labor of love.

There were barely two dozen other souls mingling about the small waiting area, most looked so bored that I was tremendously reassured.

Look at them, I thought happily. Couldn't care less. I bet that man over there has taken off during a hail of bullets. And that lady looks asleep. Can't be that bad on the runway.

I got my boarding pass and whistled on my way to my gate. But when I turned the corner, I was faced with a full view of the runway – or rather where the runway

should have been. What should have been a site of a long black runway and a horizon of evergreens had totally vanished. What I was looking at instead was a tornado of white, and the hazy of flash of yellow lights as one, two – no, *six* snowplows worked a constant circuit around the tarmac. Every now and then one of these formless machines would loom out of the blizzard like a frantic drowning man momentarily breaching for air before helplessly floundering back under the chaotic billows of his demise.

I practically ran to the window to press my nose against it. Somewhere in the fuzzy, freezing distance, I saw a plane's wing-light blinking overhead as it circled.

Canadians, I thought. *We're insane.*

I reached into my purse, retrieved my cell phone, sank to the floor and hid behind my suitcase, now creating an ever widening puddle of melted snow. I leaned my back against the window, not able to look anymore, and dialled home.

"Hello?"

"Mum, I don't think I can do it," were the first words that came out of my mouth.

"Oh, hi Laura! Are you in Montreal already?" asked my mum, eager to hear I had safely landed.

"No, I'm sitting on the floor in Fredericton airport. There are six, *fucking six*, snowploughs clearing the runway. I don't think I can get on the plane."

"Oh, honey, you'll miss your interview," she said, sounding sad for me. "And watch your language."

"Sorry," I said, and grit my teeth. *I'm going to Japan. I'm going to Japan.*

"Do you even know if planes are taking off today?"

"No. I don't know."

“Wait and see. If you can’t take off it’s not your fault. It’s a shame after all the work you went through to get the application in, but it’s okay.”

“But the hotel is booked. I can’t refund the plane ticket,” I said, and I felt like crying. Three hundred dollars is a lot of money to a near penniless, debt-ridden university graduate. And the application *had* taken ages to assemble. Several letters of recommendation from several busy former professors and my hometown mayor; endless essays about why I was a good candidate for the job; catching buses uptown through cold and snowy Fredericton every other week for enough passport photos to fill an album; frantically running at my half-hour lunch breaks to mail brutally specific forms which, had I lived in Ontario or Quebec City, I would have had a week or more to fill out – but instead I would receive only a day before they were due to be completed, signed, stamped, and back on the desk of the person who had sent them from Quebec. I would have to pay rush-post charges to get it there on time – sometimes borrowing from Kathleen to do so. And this was just to *get* the interview. It is perhaps little wonder why, with nearly seven thousand JET participants arriving in Japan each year from all over the English speaking world, in 2009 only two were from New Brunswick.

For now, however, I was sitting on the floor of a little Maritime airport clenching my phone and straining to hear the robotic lady’s voice announce whether I even had a chance of getting to Montreal at all.

I said thanks to my mum, and told her I’d either call her from my hotel or from my apartment.

The first announcement after I hung up informed all those waiting in the lounge that the flight from Toronto had turned back and was not going to be landing.

Ah, well, I thought with a glance out the window at the slightly clearer runway but no clearer skies.

The next, a half hour later, was to tell those looking expectantly at the ceiling that the 1:30 flight to Bangor Maine was cancelled.

I tried my best, I thought, with a weird sense of relief washing over me. The decision had been made for me. And on the plus, I didn't have to get into a plane today. That was worth a smile.

Then the chimes for the announcement electronically sang again, and the monotonic lady, (who sounded eerily like the computer "Mother" from the *Alien* movies) spoke.

"Attention all passengers," she said with utter disinterest. "We will begin boarding for flight CI 722 for Montreal. Please make your way to Gate 2. You now have tee minus thirty minutes to reach minimum safe distance."

The last sentence I surely imagined, but it didn't stop the room from giving an awful dip. While every other person who stretched and stood up looked relieved if not surprised, all I could do was ring my hands and start gibbering like a poorly fed monkey.

I don't remember standing. I don't remember walking to the gate. I do remember watching the line decrease as the boarding attendants ripped the boarding stubs of the passengers in front of me, who were all quickly disappearing across the tarmac and climbing the stairs to the plane which stood buffeted by the wind.

At last I was alone. The boarding attendants looked at each other and then looked at me as I did a hesitant little dance, bouncing as I took deep breaths, and then ran at them. I closed my eyes as they ripped my boarding stub, handed it back, and I

tore across the icy runway, throwing my checked luggage onto the baggage car (the airport is so small you can do that). When I opened my eyes again, I was on the plane. It was a simple, small two-by-two-by-twenty deal. Most of the seats were empty, but those that were occupied were filled with people who looked pleasantly relieved to be taking off that day. I alone looked as though I was walking towards a gallows.

I took my seat and immediately started shaking. Actually shaking. I pretended I was cold.

Sitting on the runway is the worst part for me, especially when the door is still open. I still have a chance to (very sensibly, it seems) run off. As soon we start moving my fatalism sets in (whatever happens, happens), when in the air I'm calm (we land or crash now, no point worrying anymore). But while sitting there, I'm a wreck. The flight attendant boarded and the door shut with a pneumatic hiss.

Waiting, I fumbled with the onboard magazine but I could barely read for the shake in my hands, and I crammed it back into the pocket in front of me.

I looked out the window and saw then men in orange vests. They were pointing at things. I snapped my eyes back to the seat in front of me, certain this would be the end. I could have stopped this, I thought, but I didn't. I ran to it. I am going to die a stupid, expensive death.

"Why aren't we moving?" I asked no one in particular, my voice nearly an octave higher.

The older woman, who was decked in colourful scarves and beads, smelling of patchouli oil, next to me thought I was talking to her, and I let her think this. It was the more sensible thing.

"They're just de-icing the plane," she offered knowingly.

I groaned. "Oh, Jesus." And I slid deeper into my seat and started to breathe through pursed lips. I was in an ice-coated death tube.

She seemed to gather she had caused discomfort.

"Bad flier, dear?"

"Terrible," I said, trying to block my vivid imagination from viewing the news report that would surely be the feature on *Live at Five* the following day:

"Hello, I'm Steve Murphy. Tragedy struck the Fredericton airport yesterday afternoon when a passenger plane bound for Montreal crashed moments after takeoff. Reports from the forensics team say that the plane was coated in goddamn *ice*. I mean, dumb move, right? There were no survivors. Back to you, Star and Bruce."

(While Mr Murphy is too professional to ever say this, really, he would deserve to think it. *Goddamn ice!*)

I think that I might have whimpered because the next thing I knew the old lady was holding my hand, reassuring me that she had flown off in tons worse than this. She had taken off *and* landed in a blizzard; had planes de-iced before; and once had an engine nearly fail on her.

The man across the aisle also saw my worryingly green hue, and turned to assure me that he'd been in planes that took off during thunderstorms, even been struck by lightning mid-Atlantic, this was nothing. The business man in front of him nodded approvingly and told me that he'd seen it all; he flew ten times a week, and he'd fly ten times more next week, we'd all be fine. The twenty something girl ahead of me put her magazine down and turned around, kneeling on her seat, polished nails gripping the

back of her headrest as she claimed too to fly all the time, not to worry, and that nothing scared her anymore, not after a plane she had been on had nearly crash-landed in Kenya.

Every person in my vicinity took it upon themselves to pat my shoulder and comfort me, united in their efforts to quell my fears and doubts, bonded by this mission of their own devising. I wanted to be grateful, but all I could think was, *I'm surrounded by the unluckiest fliers on the continent, what the hell is wrong with you people!*

The plane gave a slight lurch and we rolled backwards away from the airport. I closed my eyes. We rolled forward and began to pick up speed as the flight attendant did her song and dance about what to do if/when a fireball came racing out of the cockpit, and how to feed yourself extra oxygen from little yellow masks so as to insure a swifter, kinder death.

The plane paused and I opened my eyes. The passengers around me were all intermittently staring at me, and then to the backs of the seat in front of them. Lightning man caught my eye and gave me a thumbs-up. I smiled weakly.

The engines roared and I was pushed back into my seat. The g-force pressed down and down. We swerved, and so did my stomach and then – liftoff. Glorious liftoff. There wasn't even bad turbulence. As we climbed, bumping slightly into the growing twilight, I knew that we would be all right.

As we broke into thinner clouds, I smiled with genuine surprise, and coughed a little laugh. My cheering team actually applauded, and I got a few more pats on the shoulder. Likely a thanks for not puking all over their shoes.

I looked down and saw that I had dug little trenches with my nails into the palm of the old lady.

“Oh! Sorry,” I said, and let go, hastily wiping my hand with a napkin, and then hers as though this was supposed to help. But she just smiled at me. You do have to love those old hippies: So understanding.

“All better now?” she enquired.

I nodded.

“Going somewhere important?” she asked.

I smiled and watched the clear evening sky above the clouds roll past us through the window over her shoulder.

“Yes,” I said. “I’ve got an interview. I think I’m going to Japan.”