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DIFFERENT ADVENTURES ON PLANET EARTH...



BY GENEVIEVE FREW

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Flaming Neighbours

As the police were raiding my neighbour's garage recently, photographing and cataloguing the alleged stolen property, I found myself contemplating all the flaming awful neighbours I've had over the years.

I've had my fair share, ranging from the stupid to the psychotic.

Somehow though, I reckon the selfish ones, with their petty acts of neighbourly neglect, were worse than the scary ones.

Of course the bloke who held a knife at my sixteen-year-old throat and threatened to kill me if I made any noise was very frightening,
but he never assumed he could park in my driveway because he had two cars.

The peeping tom who found my phone number and had me curled up on the floor in fear with his late night breathing phone calls had a few issues,
but he never put coffee cups or cigarettes into my garden.

Whilst the couple running 'rebirthing' classes in the flat next door to ours, with groups of people panting and chanting through our walls for hour upon hour, were perhaps a bit misguided, they never recommended I take down my wind chimes because they found the noise too loud.

And the Russian lady who shared a double bed with her adult daughter in their one bedroom flat was insanely jealous of me and my small child in our two bedroom flat,
but she never requested I only use my washing machine between certain hours of the day.

Perhaps my next move will be to the country, where the flaming neighbours are a bit further away...

In Melbourne VIC, Australia

There is a 'bermb' in the building!

When I was working as a young receptionist for an international oil company, I answered the switchboard to a man calling for my flatmate (who worked for the same company). I transferred it through to her without giving it a second thought.

A minute or so later I answered another call and spoke to a gentleman who was doing a poor impersonation of Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau. He asked for me. When I acknowledged myself he said, once again using the awful accent, that there was a “bermb in the building”. He then promptly hung up.

Even though I was quite young it did occur to me that this was a hoax, but then my flatmate called the switchboard and we swapped stories about our calls from the same man. However it was the 1980s, during the time of the Iran-Iraq war and working in a large oil company came with some responsibilities.

From there the panic button was hit. The big-wigs were informed and she and I were questioned under close scrutiny. The police were even called in and we were questioned further. However, because we were flatmates and friends it was the general consensus that it was a practical joke being played upon us, but we had no idea by whom.

One of the young police constables took a fancy to me and we ended up dating for many months, but our relationship just lacked spark, and I think our number was up after a night at the movies to see Mad Max. The movie was interrupted halfway through when the cinema was evacuated due to a ... a bomb threat.

In North Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Paris Hates Me

I apologise, in advance, to all the Francophiles out there but put quite simply, I hate Paris – or rather, Paris hates me. In my defence there are specific reasons for this antagonism that date back to a time when I was half my age and the world was a little younger too. I do look forward to an eventual detente, but for now let me take you on my litany of loathing:

I arrived in Calais on the Hovercraft - the ferries were on strike. The speedy journey was great - dislodged my skim milk powder throughout my backpack. I waited 1½ hours for the train to Paris - sat in chewing gum. I arrived in Paris sticky from head to toe.

The first hostel I found was full; the second was filthy. I dumped my pack and headed into the city. The streets were filled with things to be avoided: bicycles bearing baguettes, guards with guns, and a whole lot of dog poo.

I had to find a bank to get some cash. This simple task took me 4½ hours as I went from Banque to Banque to get a cash advance on my Mastercard (it was a long time ago) and the tellers did what the French do best – ignored me.

I couldn't even phone a friend because the public phones used cards instead of coins.

When I finally had money in my pocket I went to buy food. I was called a capitalist by a shopkeeper, so went to a café instead where I masterfully ordered a crepe - filled with just lettuce!

Sightseeing proved pointless as I reached the L'Arc du Triomphe – it closed early. So I ventured to the Palace of Versailles – huge! I headed back to the train but couldn't locate my Eurailpass – lost it somewhere in Versailles – huge!

I actually contemplated stabbing myself for attention but had left my Swiss Army knife in the hostel. Throwing myself under a Citroen Deux Chevaux just wasn't the same.

I had to get out – I left for Nice, and never looked back.

In Paris, France

“Our lives can't be measured by our final years, of this I am sure.”

The following is a true story; I just couldn't make this stuff up:

I have always been a sucker for the elderly, and I always give a wave and a smile to the people who live in a local hostel that accommodates seniors who are financially disadvantaged. I know several of them by name and I have heard their stories, some mundane, some fascinating. In that latter group are the two following fellows:

Frederick is a Yorkshireman, born near Captain James Cook's home town, so he tells me. He arrived in Australia as a young man because Canada was too cold and he became a high school science teacher. He quotes Charles Darwin in every conversation and assures me his stay at the hostel is only temporary - he'll be leaving soon to return to the UK to meet with Stephen Hawking at the conference on cold fusion!

On my walks with the dog I often pass Frank, who sits on his veranda, reading under a poor light. He used to be a policeman who left the force after mistakenly arresting an undercover drug squad detective. Frank then became a tram driver, and now he just reads. I asked him what kind of non-fiction books he prefers in order to bring him some – History? Science? Geography? Biography?

His reply was startling, to say the least, as he said, without guile, he likes to read stories about women being locked up and held hostage...!

As I said, I just couldn't make this stuff up.

In Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Chops or Sausages

When I was a young child my mother placed, upon my small shoulders, the following onerous decision: chops or sausages?

I don't really know why she expected so much of me at such a tender age; how could I be expected to weigh up the economic, ethical and ecological issues attached to eating lamb versus... well, whatever it is in sausages.

Did she really expect me to drive a wedge between Australian sheep farmers and the sausage skin manufacturers, at my age?

The implications of her loaded question were really not well thought out, nor well executed. You see, she would often ask me this question first thing in the morning, as she headed off to work before I was fully awake.

And because my decision was made in haste, with a pre-cursor of panic, I would spend my entire day at primary school pre-occupied with the plaguing fear that I had made the wrong decision and the family's festival of meat would be cruelled by my immature forecast.

As I got older I got better at learning to live with my decisions; so much so that in high school I didn't give them a second thought throughout the day and was often even surprised when I sat down for the evening meal.

But by then, of course, my mother had moved up the food pyramid and hit us with a dilemma for a different decade –
peas or beans?

In Sydney, New South Wales, Australia

Happy Hogmanay

After spending Christmas with friends in Hull, Yorkshire, my fiancé and I hired a car and headed north to Scotland for New Year's Eve, 1986. What could be more romantic than enjoying Hogmanay with highland malt and haggis???

After one night in Edinburgh we had to leave because everything was closing for the 5-day long weekend, including most hotels and the banks. On the advice of a helpful local we headed off for Aviemore, to spend New Year's Eve at this popular ski resort.

This great advice wasn't so great after all as we couldn't find any accommodation for love nor money. We drove about 50km up to Inverness with no luck. So back to Aviemore again, in case we'd missed something. Driving back we heard the New Year ring in over the radio but there was nothing romantic about it as we were running out of petrol, and patience.

So we had no choice but to sleep in the hire car by the side of the A9, turning on the engine every half hour so we wouldn't freeze to death. I dropped the keys in the long frozen grass when I went out to pee during the night and cried frozen tears of self-pity and despair as my fiancé fumbled around for them.

The long night eventually ended when splinters of sunlight pierced through the frosted windscreen and we couldn't wait to leave our roadside motel. We found a petrol station, filled up and started 1987 with packets of chips and lollies and a resolution to rethink our idea of a romantic getaway.

In Scotland, United Kingdom

Right Royal Fools

I thought this was a very good April Fool's day prank that was played upon the passengers aboard Cunard's Queen Elizabeth, whilst I was on board in 2012.

This is the notice that appeared in the daily bulletin on 1st April:

IMPORTANT NOTICE: BUNKERING OPERATION

During our last bunkering operation in Singapore on the 24th March we took delivery of thousands of tons of contaminated heavy fuel oil. This fuel is unusable for our diesel electric motors and therefore until we reach Mumbai we need to use QUEEN ELIZABETH's Gas Turbines.

These powerful auxiliary motors are normally only used to supplement our power and therefore we carry a limited supply of fuel for them. Fortunately due to their ecologically sound design we can use a variety of household and everyday items as potential fuel sources. The most effective of these is the lotic gas produced from the burning of suntan lotion. We need your help. We have a receptacle in the Grand Lobby on deck one and if everyone onboard donates a squirt of suntan lotion then we calculate that we will be able to produce enough lotic gas to power the Gas Turbines and help us reach Mumbai on time. Thank you for your support with this unusual situation – together we can ensure a timely arrival in Mumbai.

We need your suntan lotion

In Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Shaking my chakra

Despite being born under the sign of Aquarius I'm not a new-age kind of girl. I don't meditate, I'm not vegetarian and incense makes me sneeze.

So I started doing a class called 'yogalates' in my local park; a cross between yoga and pilates which I saw as a chance for some stretching as I spend so much of my life hunched over the computer.

I tried to take it seriously, I really did, but the teacher had us panting like a dog, arching like a cat, roaring like a lion and something like a crocodile; I missed the word as the wind whistled through the branches above us.

Then as I lay down for the final stretch the teacher started banging a stick in a bowl and spoke of chakras as my concentration wandered off. The wind got louder and only some of her words reached my ears.

I caught the word 'souls' - something to do with our life force perhaps...

I heard 'calves' - visions of young cows being sacrificed to appease the yoga gods...

When I heard 'thighs' confusion set in - I had visions of vestal virgins standing before a raging fire - had the teacher lost her mind.

Then logic struck me between the eyes (or possibly a falling leaf) as I realised she was telling us to work our way up the body, cleansing our chakras.

This went on forever and as I lay on the grass getting itchy and shaking in the breeze I reaffirmed that I am no good at this new-age exercise and made a mental note to go home, pour myself a glass of wine, and write it down.

In Melbourne, Victoria, Australia

Sweat

Hong Kong looks so glamorous in the brochures. They promise you exotic delights, inexpensive shopping and a superb nightlife combined with the history and the mystery of the east.

Nobody mentions the sweat!

I guess it's difficult to capture sweat in photographs, and who wants to travel eight hours in compressed air to arrive at your destination and...
sweat?

I presume that the emphasis on clothes shopping comes from the need to rapidly replace rotting garments and the delight in purchasing duty-free perfumes is to purloin the pong.

Attractive as shopping is, the body acclimatises quickly and soon you are cool, then cooler, then shivering and start trying on coats. Freezing, you push open the vacuum-sealed doors to the outside world.

Back on the steaming streets you are jostled along by the crowd, who don't seem to realise that the quicker you move, the more you sweat.

Sweat is heavy; just like the precariously positioned air-conditioners jutting out from every window, and you look at them longingly. You can't try on any more clothes and you can forget trying on any shoes with those swollen feet!

Nothing left to do but to go back to the hotel, have another shower, turn on the TV and order room service.

Then snuggle down under the blankets (in the air-conditioned room) and look longingly at the glossy brochures (supplied by the marketers and merchandisers) of people doing what you have been doing all day – without a single, solitary sign of sweat!

In Hong Kong

About Author

Genevieve Frew

I love travel, but not so much on planes these days - I prefer to cruise and take my hotel with me to each new port. I love reading travel stories and, of course, love writing my own too. Enjoy.

Why is the website called bytestories.com?

This is a place for "byte-sized" stories and there is a 1500 character (about 250 words) limit for two main reasons. Firstly, we want you to know that "War and Peace" isn't required to leave your mark. Secondly, it takes about 2 minutes to read each story meaning you can head here whenever you want a quick (and entertaining) read.

If you would like to share a story or create your own eBook, simply head to bytestories.com, Register an account and click on the "Share a Story" button.