

4 Days in Texas **or : How to become a surly American in no time flat**

...And things were going so well.

I had not looked forward to my trip to the Fort Bliss military base in El Paso. But the 3 days of shooting (videos, not guns) had turned out to be much more pleasant than I'd imagined. Truly beautiful landscape that beckoned at the border of New Mexico, and hot, sunny, dry conditions – a welcome respite from the sleet, snow, and ice we left behind in Montreal.

There were great moments. Indelible ones, even. Seeing the sunrise light up the mountains in a matter of mere seconds. Wow. It almost made up for the ridiculously early call-time that morning, leaving our hotel at o'dark thirty.

There were serendipitous moments. Like driving on a dark, desert highway, cool wind in my hair, just as "Hotel California" came on the radio. And ten minutes later, driving on Martin Luther King Blvd, just as "Pride (In the Name of Love)" started playing. The only other time that kind of thing happened, I was in LA, driving on Santa Monica Blvd. (Yeah, that song.)

So weather and serendipity were on our side. The film shoot went smoothly. Not a rattlesnake in sight in the desert. I didn't even have to wear the dreaded 15-pound frag vest and the 5-pound helmet that crushes my skull.

The only "ewww" moment happened as we were having lunch in the field with the troops one day, when Robert found a dozen tiny live bugs in the trail-mix envelope from his American ration pack. I suppose he could have sued and become rich very soon, but he's a mild-mannered Canadian boy. He kept it to himself. The really bad news was that he found the bugs at the bottom of his trail-mix envelope.

But overall, things were, um, blissful in Fort Bliss.

And then, on the 4th day, as we're leaving, the tide turns. It starts when we arrive at El Paso Airport and run around frantically looking for luggage carts. (It's hard to run around with 400 pounds of baggage.) You'd think they'd have them near the Departures entrance, wouldn't you? When Michael finally chases one down, we remember from 4 days ago that we have to PAY for a luggage cart. WTF? Who is stealing luggage carts?

So we self-check-in with one of those handy touch-screens and line up at the American Airlines counter to drop off our equipment. But the American Airlines check-in system would have none of that linear logic. Robert hears his name called out by an agent at the counter. As he tries to gently push his way out of the line, the agent calls his name repeatedly, and with increasing urgency. What could be wrong?

Nothing, as it turns out, other than the American Airlines check-in system is an IDIOTIC process by which passenger names are spit out at the counter to be processed in random order, REGARDLESS OF WHERE YOU ARE STANDING IN THE LINE-UP.

Michael gets called next, as I struggle to hold on to the remaining 6 cases of gear teetering on the one lousy luggage cart that we managed to pay for by cobbling together all the loose change we had between the three of us.

Then my name is called. I bob and weave through the line, waving to the agent to signal that I'll get to the counter in a matter of seconds. He sees me approach empty-handed and rolls his eyes.

"I need your bags, ma'am" he snarls, as though explaining the concept to a 4-year-old.

"Yes", I assure him, "my houseboy Coco¹ is bringing them". I point towards Robert, who has wisely chosen to bring the remaining bags to the counter by walking around the COMPLETELY IRRELEVANT LINE-UP, lest he hit someone in the shins with 150 pounds of pelican case.

The agent sighs exasperatedly as we wait.

"Do-you-need-to-check-my-ID-or-my-boarding-pass?" I enunciate slowly, explaining a concept to him.

Finally, we make our way towards Security. We're doing okay for time, all things considered. We follow the crowd until a big throng of people congests the hallway at the bottom of an escalator.

"Excuse me, where is Security?"

With one hand, the woman in uniform points up the escalator, and with the other, points us to the back of the throng, which we now realize is loosely a line.

"So this is a line-up to get into the line-up?"

Great. So long as we're clear.

As we gradually make our way through the line-up (no random processing here), I am seized by that unexplainable discomfort brought on by Security and Customs. Why do I feel this way even if I have absolutely nothing to feel guilty about?

In fact, I've already been investigated once on this trip – on the way here, I was selected at Dorval for a random personal search, a search just intimate enough that I would've been within my rights to demand that it be performed by a woman. (It was.)

¹ gratuitous "Mad About You" reference. I spew them out on a regular basis just to amuse myself.

She didn't fuss over my nectarine, banana and granola bars, even though I had just sworn on my Customs card that I wasn't bringing any food into the US. And she only had a mild interest in my contact lens solution. But the body pat-down was invasive enough that my abs contracted in an involuntary tickle-guard reflex and my bra straps got moved slightly to the left. Can a full-body scanner do that?

“Good morning, this is your Captain (*garble-garble*), on behalf of first officer (*garble-garble*) and your Dallas-based crew, we'd like to welcome you aboard American Airlines flight 802 with service to Montreal. Our flight time will be 3 hours and 20 minutes, and we'll be flying at a cruising altitude of 33 000 feet, in winds of (*garble-garble*) velocity.... Our flight trajectory will take us through (*garble-garble*) and over (*garble-garble*)...”

Fellow passengers, I ask you: do we really care that our crew is based in Dallas? Do we need to know that our cruising altitude will be 33 000 feet or that we'll be flying in winds of (*garble-garble*) velocity? Seriously? Just get me home safely, that's all I ask.

Of course, let's be thankful for small mercies. On an Air Canada flight, that 4-minute spiel would be followed by a 5-minute spiel in a chirpy voice – “Mesdames et messieurs, le commandant (*garble-garble*) vous souhaite la bienvenue au nom du premier officier (*garble-garble*)...”

I've already read through all the magazines in my seat pocket. I think I'll watch the movie. Of course, someone tall is sitting in front of me, but I still have a decent view of the screen at the front of our section, so it'll do.

Cleverly titled “Martian Child”, the movie is about a loopy kid who thinks he's, um, a Martian, and is adopted by John Cusack in one of his quirky-yet-sensitive-and-hyperarticulate-adorkable-single-male-that-makes-women-swoon-so-you-would-never-believe-he's-single-in-the-first-place roles that he does so well. Joan Cusack plays his quirky-yet-sensitive-and-hyperarticulate-adorkable sister (natch).

What is wrong with the volume controls on this plane? It's either blaring or it's nary a whisper. I fiddle with the up-and-down arrows as John tries to bond with the Martian kid who's hiding in a cardboard box.

Ah, food is coming. Of course, we're seated in the next-to-last row, but it's nice to know sustenance is on the way.

“Folks, this is your captain – if you look down to the right of the aircraft, you'll be able to see (*garble-garble*) as we fly over Missouri...”

Oh great, our captain is a freakin' tour guide.

The movie resumes after his rude interruption. But I'm antsy. I need to eat. Here comes the food and beverage cart. I buy a sandwich from Doug with my last remaining American bill, a \$20. He's peeved.

"You don't have anything smaller?"

Gee, Doug, you think maybe if I had a \$5 bill to buy a \$5 sandwich, I might've used it?

"No".

He nods grudgingly and takes the \$20. "I'll get you some change." He makes a note to himself on a napkin and continues serving the last row.

You're kidding, I think. You've just served 150 people or so, and you can't break a \$20?

Meanwhile, his perky colleague Pascale is serving the row ahead of us and shuffling a wad of bills (10's, 5's, 1's) RIGHT ACROSS FROM HIM, ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CART, no more than 30 inches away from his face.

Wha'ever. I eat my sandwich. Twenty-five minutes go by.

"Folks, if you look down on the left (*garble-garble*)..."

"Hey Captain (*garble-garble*) – I have a middle seat. I can't see jack", I yell at him. In my head, on the imaginary two-way comm system.

No sign of Surly Doug. Oh yes, here he comes, just ambling down the aisle.

"Excuse me, you never brought me my change?" I remind him.

"I got it written down", says Surly Doug, barely acknowledging me.

That was his entire answer. Not "I'm sorry", or "Don't worry ma'am", or "I'll get to it as soon as I can". Nope. No eye contact. Didn't even break his stride. Just 5 words: "I got it written down".

I'm floored. And now, I'm pissed. And believe me, it wasn't a \$20 sandwich.

"I DESERVE YOU" blares John as he tries to bond with the Martian kid at a ball game.

Ouch, my ears. I press the little down-arrow. One notch.

"I told you it wouldn't be easy" whispers Joan. Or something to that effect, but I can't be sure, because I can't hear the f***ing movie at a REGULAR VOLUME.

Aaarggghhhhh! What is wrong with me? I need a nap, I decide. But Surly Doug still hasn't brought me my change, and I wanna bite his head off.

Meanwhile, Perky Pascale has been up and down the aisle, serving additional snacks and shuffling more bills (10's! 5's! 1's!) every time she passes by.

On her way back, she offers to pick up my garbage.

"I think I'll hang on to it", I say, attempting to smile. "I'm saving my garbage for Surly Doug", I add. In my head.

Perky Pascale's frozen smile turns quizzical and I swear I saw her arch an eyebrow as she backed away from me.

"Folks, as you look down on the right of the aircraft..."

28 rows x 6 seats = 168 passengers

28 rows x 2 = 56 passengers with window seats

28 rows x 1 = 28 passengers with a window seat on the right

Minus the ones who are sleeping, minus the ones who are reading, minus the ones who are holding up the line for the toilet, minus the ones who are trying to watch John and the Martian kid...

"Hey Captain (*garble-garble*)? Could you stop interrupting the f***ing movie for the 2 people who actually give a crap that they can see Lexington from 33 000 feet up?"
(Okay, it turns out that altitude information did come in handy.)

The sandwich has surely decomposed in my stomach by now – we're nearing the 60-minute mark since I bought it. When I see Surly Doug again, he's just ambling once more, picking up an empty glass here, a newspaper there. Not terribly busy by the looks of it.

He offers to pick up my garbage.

"Can-I-get-my-change-please?" I insist, enunciating slowly, explaining yet another concept today.

"I told you – I don't have it right now, but I got it written down..." he explains, no less exasperated.

"It's not that I'm worried you'll forget about it – it's just that I'd like to take a nap" I snap at him. "Is it too much to ask to conclude a simple 3-step transaction in under 60 minutes, whereby you give me a product, I give you money, and you give me change? Seriously?"

I hand him my garbage, with the messy face down (I hope) as he walks away and mutters some more. “I got it written down – it’s not like I’m going anywhere...”

Well, not with that attitude, buddy.

I close my eyes, but now I’m way too pissed to fall asleep. He comes back with my change within a few seconds. “There – was that so hard???” I say to him. In my head.

And then, an epiphany, just as John rescues the Martian kid off a ledge. (Who needs sound anyway?)

It dawns on me. The reason I was so, um, blissful in Fort Bliss for those first 3 days, the key to my happiness in America. The key was: avoiding Americans.²

From the moment we picked up our subtle fire-engine red Hummer at the airport 4 days ago to the moment we brought back our subtle, slightly dinged, dusty fire-engine red Hummer this morning, I hadn’t actually had any significant encounter with an American. The Fort Bliss training area was populated entirely by Canadian Forces for the length of the exercise. Aside from minimal daily interaction with hotel clerks or infallibly polite restaurant staff (working for tips, duh), I managed to steer completely clear of Americans.

It’s all so obvious now. But more importantly, it will be over soon.

“Folks, we’re flying over London, Ontario right now...”

Oh thank god – Canadian soil. A knot loosens in my stomach (or maybe it’s just the sandwich) and I fall asleep in an instant.

When I wake up, we’re about to land. Surly Doug is walking the aisle.

“Put your seats back in the upright position. ...Please put your seats back up...”

He glares at me expectantly, waiting for me to do it. I shrug. We lock eyes for what seems like an eternity.

“...I got it written down”, I say dismissively. In my head.

But what the heck – we’re back in Canada now. I pull my seat upright.

When I walk off the plane, I feel rejuvenated, light on my feet. I am carefree and serene, and ready to face Canada Customs.

I gladly get into the line-up. For the line-up.

² Dear American reader: it’s not you, it’s the others. In fact, I’m convinced there are 10 Perky Pascales for every Surly Doug. But let’s face it: a full 7 years into W’s reign, even your polite Canadian friends were bound to turn on you.