

FLYING TO THE FOOTY

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It all starts when some bloody feminist reviewer savages me in a famous Melbourne journal. I'm for ripping back a corrosive reply, point for point, but: "Keep your dignity", advises a friend, "take it on the chin." She's right of course, so I elect aloof silence. Yet... the whole thing stays with me. Rankles, as they say. And suddenly, while rankling pretty intensely early one morning, I see the proper solution. I will go over to Melbourne and kill her. It's so obvious, I wonder why I didn't see it earlier; and why other authors haven't had recourse to such an effective method which, while maintaining the gentleman's agreement that the writer should not reply to reviews, nevertheless silences the offending reviewer for good, thus, *en passant*, profoundly encouraging the others [*les autres*].

Once I make this decision, I'm feeling much better; more rational, you understand, and I begin to plan in greater detail, If I'm going all the way to Melbourne to kill this bloody feminist reviewer I might just as well go at the weekend and see a game of footy. VFL footy. I see myself flying in on Saturday morning, going to a game, having a few beers afterwards and then getting a good night's sleep so I can do the job Sunday morning and fly back west that afternoon.

For some people, they can't talk airily like this about flying. But I'm used to it of course. I'm always flying round one place and another. Just last week I'm from Adelaide to Canberra and a bit before that I'm from Adelaide to Sydney a couple of times and late last year I'm from Adelaide to Melbourne and then Sydney. Once I even went to Perth and there's every chance I'll get to Brisbane in the foreseeable. It's nothing to me, believe me. When you fly like I do, practically all the time, you learn how it is up there. Like, when the hostess says read the instruction book in your seat pocket because "we cover some very important points", naturally I never do. I watch other people read it and then I smirk at them. We old hands... I once

told a bloke sitting next to me (it goes without saying that I requested the aisle seat) not to mind if I crowded him a bit when we were ready to move because the aisle people had to lean inwards so the captain could see to back out. I told the same bloke that if he was caught smoking in the lavatory during the flight he'd be put off the 'plane. I think he quite enjoyed sitting next to me.

When you fly as much as I do, you know the traps. Like the orange juice, for instance. Those little plastic containers of orange juice with the foil top. Usually they put them in your coffee cup, to save space I suppose. Do a survey sometime and find out how many people realise that those containers are very slightly pressurised, so that when you peel back the tab on the foil - no matter how slowly and carefully - orange juice squirts straight out and hits you, if you are female, right between the breasts - across your frilly top or whatever; and if you are male, it describes an arc just missing your casual jacket or white public service shirt or suit coat, and lands right on your flies. Nothing you can do during the rest of that flight, no matter how long its duration, will dry that stain - that slightly yellowing stain on your flies. Next time you're hanging round the arrival hall of an airport playing the computer games or planning to steal leftover baggage, take a look at the men coming off the latest flight. Can they all be crippled/you ask yourself. Well, not all; the ones whoaren't walking half doubled up like a campanologist on worker's camp., trying to stretch their coats down near their knees, or hip-hopping along with their bags poised in front of their zips - they're the ones who didn't have the orange juice. Even if you know about the orange juice container and hold it very firmly and remove the tab millimetre by millimetre, it will still get you because the container itself has a special double-edged rim which ensures that orange juice will dribble past even the most genteel or prehensile lip and land right on ... you've guessed it. Don't think you<sup>1</sup>ll win by pouring the juice into your coffee cup either. As the last drop goes in, you hit clear air turbulence and you get the lot all over you [etc]. (In any case, that procedure - useless for its

planned purpose - is the only way ever discovered to make airline coffee taste worse than usual.)

The thing is, don't have the juice. Although, you could wear old clothes so that you don't care about the stains; or yellow pants. Myself, I give a lot of thought to particular ensembles for particular flights. Like, I prefer always to wear some form of jacket, maybe with a guru collar and loose sleeves rolled up one turn, perhaps navy blue or grey. And with these I go for light, perhaps even frankly white, slacks and I wear my captain's sailing hat with the braid. The reason for this is that at Adelaide we don't have a (how you say in the eastern states?) AIR BRIDGE or JETWAY. When your flight is called, you have to walk out on to the tarmac to the forward or rear stairs. Well, in my get-up, I'm often mistaken for an offduty pilot. Twice I've been upgraded to first class and once I was shown straight into the cockpit.

Well, anyway , I book myself a flight, fix it all up with good old Amex, and by ten o'clock central standard I'm in an aisle seat (9D - right behind business class) on Flight 27 to Melbourne, on my way to see a game of VFL footy and rid the world of this bloody feminist reviewer I mentioned earlier. I haven't risked trying to get a weapon through Adelaide Airport security. I plan to do some in-flight pondering about the *modus operandi*. My idea is to maybe push her under a tram or smash her head in with a break, but the circumstances might dictate some other method once I'm, as the hit-men say, on the ground (*in terram*). I'm not too worried about it.

Usually on flights I bury myself instantly in a newspaper or book or even the airline's free mag. to discourage conversation. This is what I do 'as soon as I am ensconced in 9D but for once, wouldn't you know, it doesn't work and the bloke next to me says:

- Terrible lot of bullshit these airlines go on with.
- Well I...

- Just a glorified bloody bus. Only difference, if the engines stop on this thing she'll fall out of the sky like a brick shithouse. What're you doing in Melbourne?

Well I'm...

- I'm only going via Melbourne. Couldn't get a direct flight. Typical. I'm going on to Sydney actually. Connected with the Swans.

- You work for the Zoo? I ask. The RSPCA?

Of course I know what he means but I'm already getting tired of this game.

- Sydney Swans, he explains, as if used to this kind of impenetrable obtuseness. Football team. You not interested in footy?

- That's why I'm going to Melbourne. To see the footy.

- You fly to the footy?

I tell him that I have a certain job to do in Melbourne and that I decided to combine business with pleasure. Little does he know that I'm combining pleasure with pleasure,

- You a writer? he asks, fiddling with one of the air-flow nozzles, which turns out to be the one for my seat.

The Airbus shudders. We are about to move.

- Don't worry if I crowd you a bit for the next few minutes, I say to him. People in the aisle seats have to lean inwards so the Captain can see to back out.

- They don't back out at Adelaide, he says, without a flicker. There's no Air Bridge. They just swing round. When you do a lot of flying like I do you get to know things like that,

The plane swings round.

- You a writer?

- Part time, I mumble, hating the truth. For someone who flies so much, he doesn't seem to recognise an off-duty pilot when he sees one.

- So what job're you doing in Melbourne?

- It's a matter of...of dead lines, I tell him, rather pleased with my murderous little pun, not that he'd notice, To tell the truth, I go on, I'm flying over to kill a reviewer.

- I've been recruiting for the Swans in Adelaide, he says.

I should have known, of course. He has that ferrety look; there are still traces of blacking on his face and his hair is unnaturally flattened by wearing the black beanie. He has powder

burns on his thumb and index finger. A football Contra raiding the beleaguered Nicaragua of the yet-to-be-proclaimed National League, covertly encouraged by Ross (Ronald Reagan) Oakley who, putting binoculars to both blind eyes, announces he can see no threat to local leagues West of Bordertown.

Dropping into my stride, I tell this guerilla that, as a Melbourne-born adopted South Australian I deplore the blood-sucking of the VFL while recognising that VFL footy is a miracle seen nowhere else in the country - let alone the world - and especially not at Carrara or the SCG because it's been imposed there on people who don't have the game in their blood and didn't grow up kicking footies made out of rolled up newspapers or old socks in the smokey backstreets of inner suburban or industrial Melbourne. Or even Carlton in the days before the wrought iron was spruced up and the Neighbourhood was well and truly Watched. I give him a triumphant look and a minute and a half to ingest. He says:

- Know why there's so much soccer violence? Because the bastards never score. All this nil-all draw bullshit, or one-all or whatever. Make anyone pull the stands down.

I tell him that when I was a small boy, my Dad took me to see what turned out to be the "Fighting Final" (much to Dad's dismay - because I enjoyed it so much); that I had barracked for St. Kilda since I could walk; that following the St. Kilda Football Club for so long taught one a great deal about the meaning of life - which was struggle, defeat and hope springing eternal; that in 1950 St. Kilda had won their first five games in succession and that when they beat Les Foote's North Melbourne (who would be Grand Finalists that September) for their fifth win, amazing scenes were witnessed; and that there had been a controversial local election in St. Kilda that day and as the siren went with the Saints hanging on by two points and only seventeen men standing, some bloke who'd got an early edition *Herald* yelled out in the crush: "Michaelis won the election" and an old bloke near us, with tears in his eyes, said, "Fuck the election"; and that I was there in 1966 when the Saints beat bloody Collingwood to win the Grand Final by a point and that

they should have won the year before but for nerves and would have won in '71 if bloody Hawthorn hadn't crippled Stewie Trott because he was winning the game on his own; and that, incidentally, on the way to winning their first five successive games in 1950, they'd beaten South Melbourne, who were called South Melbourne then and not the bloody skin-tight Sydney Swans or leotard lairs and that the St. Kilda-South game was called traditionally the "Lake Premiership" and not the bloody Hume Highway Hassle or something; and that did he realise that in a recent game, Carlton took the ball from the back pocket to their goal square without a single Victorian touching it - Naley, Bradley, Kernahan, Hunter - three South Australians and a Sandgroper, and...

- Well that's National isn't it, he said.

- What?

- That's National footy, if three Croweaters and a Sandgroper playing for a Victorian team combine to get a goal. What more do you want? If Silvagni had got a touch as well it'd be Multicultural.

A feeling comes over me very similar to the one I'd had when reading that bloody feminist review and I consider arranging a Swan song for this bastard along with the ignominious exit I was planning for my favourite reviewer. But just then, the hostess deals out the snacks.

- Listen, I say, allowing my respect for the fruits of research (especially my own research) to overcome sturdy and growing dislike, don't go near the orange juice. If you do it...

- I wouldn't touch it for money, he says. Let's have a drink against the day.

A drink against the day! The phrase is far too good for him and I'm certain he stole it; just as I'm certain I'm going to steal it from him.

He orders whiskies. By the time we are ensuring that our seat belts and table tops are secured in the upright position and are bumping down through Melbourne's habitual grey overcast, I'm persuaded that maybe I should go up and have a look at the Swans sometime ...

In Melbourne, I watch Carlton play Collingwood at the MCG and am rewarded with one of the most brilliant quarters of footy anyone could ever imagine and the best high mark (by Stephen Silvagni) that I'd seen since my Dad and I saw John Coleman - held to one point till half time by Bruce Phillips - kick eleven in the second half; and all in all, loathe Carlton as I do and detest Collingwood as anyone must, it is a sensational game the likes of which, for skill, atmosphere, speed, excitement and passion, cannot be seen anywhere else in the entire universe (including and especially Carrara and-the SCG. It's true that you stand a change of seeing something like it at Subiaco but only at the expense of the entire West Australian Football League).

Giving some thought after the game to my other project, I decide that I'm not fully prepared (thought I remain thoroughly committed) and that I should fly back next weekend, see a game, and then strike. I have come round to poison, which will be satisfyingly agonising and drawn out but which will require some adroit manoeuvring for its credible and anonymous administration. I resolve to spend the intervening week considering the options and finalising my sortie. From the "Notes on Contributors" at the back of the journal I have a list of this despicable woman's published books and I briefly toy with the idea of ducking in to the State Library and mutilating them. But time is short and I save that one up.

On the flight back to Adelaide on Sunday, I break a rule, Dehydrated by the hours of drinking that accompanied the previous evening's post-mortems, I decide to have some orange juice. Fully cognisant of the traps, I hold the container in an iron grip and tense my arm and fingers to peel the foil top. Usually, it resists as if welded; but this one, adding a new dimension to my observations of the phenomenon, twangs back like a wire door on a country Post Office. Taken unawares my whole body, rigid with concentration, jerks forward. Orange juice spirals lazily from the fully opened top and lands...

Secretive rubbing of my crutch during the remainder of the trip only awakens deep suspicion in the lady across, the aisle.

She seems on the point of laying a complaint when, amazingly, one of the hostesses, seeing my plight, fetches a cloth dampened with warm water and has a bit of a rub herself, with consequences as spectacular as they are irrelevant.

Pole-vaulting from the plane into a broad, blue-skied Adelaide morning, it suddenly strikes me that my project should not be lightly undertaken. It will need a number of trips to Melbourne on several weekends and much rehearsal and research. As I enter the terminal, I realise that my reviled reviewer must die on the last Sunday in September. If I happen to have tickets to the Grand Final, so be it. From A View To A Death, as *whatsisname* said.