



Stumbling back to Britain

With the wonders of Singapore disappearing in the jetstream, I was starting to have misgivings. Just prior to leaving the island city, I had been offered a job by my boss to manage one of their *TEFL* colleges. It was very tempting: an assured salary (unlike the vagaries of classroom teaching) plus life in a city I had begun to love. Quite tantalizing, but in reality, impossible; months before it had been agreed that we would travel on as a family to England. The die had been cast!

The cockpit told me London's temperature was zero degrees Celsius! After leaving the thirty-degree norm behind on the Malaysian peninsula, it promised to be a shade on the cool side. Trudging through Heathrow airport's drab grey corridors, at six in the morning, while looking out on the frosty scene, didn't lift my spirits much either. It was supposed to be Spring, but felt more like one of those dark, cold winter days from childhood past.

Outside, blowing steam clouds and rugged up against the biting wind, I hired a brand-new *Ford Mondeo* estate from *Hertz*: the largest motor on the block, with a rear compartment the size of a small truck; logic being that with a partner and two growing girls, plus a mountain of child-supporting luggage, we needed more than our fair share of space. One of the larger bags - a cheap, but cavernous affair - had burst its stretched zipper embarrassingly in the *Changi* departure lounge, the whole drama thrilling my three-year-old. Now, the plastic monster was held together with knotted strings; pajama

arms and doll's heads poking out here and there. I recall now with some horror, the mountain of (so-called) hand-baggage, loaded onto my daughter's pushchair, which I wheeled quite gingerly, towards the plane doorway; then the aghast look of the hostess when she spotted me behind the oncoming juggernaut! If it had been Qantas, I could have expected a stream of expletives deleted, but once she had recovered from her initial shock, the beautifully saronged lady handled it all with customary aplomb.

It had taken months of strenuous activity for my partner to arrange a 12-month job exchange with a British counterpart in Gloucestershire, some two hours drive West of our Heathrow Airport arrival point. After struggling to cram all the bags into the rear compartment, and with dolls and pajamas now free to roam, we set off for our new home-away-from-home. The vehicle, in a lustrous black fringed with gleaming chrome, was uncharacteristically posh and too large for me. The significance of assuming the *Mondeo Man* label (and all its thinly veiled intimations) did not rest easily with this new-age man from the antipodes. That aside, driving out of Heathrow for the first time in my life - new country, swish car, unfamiliar motorway – certainly brought the brain cells up to speed; but after some time, the soporific effect of an empty Sunday morning M4, had the opposite impact, nullifying the earlier adrenalin rush, and giving me time to muse on our precarious situation.

Looking back, this semi-permanent move to the northern hemisphere, planned for almost 12 months, was seen as the trial run for a permanent shift. But it was not the first attempt. With a younger family, we had come a few years before, setting up camp first amongst my extended clan in Cornwall, then when my partner scored a rather belated, but face-saving job, moving to a leafy suburb in North London. As it turned out, right from our arrival those three years before - during that first attempted shift from Australia back to Britain - I was the main problem: unable to secure work and reduced to household chores and child-minding. That was all fine by me, but the stark reality of the bottom line meant there was not enough money to go round. My partner's London job alleviated the situation to some degree, (and in my defense, as well as pushing the little one off to childcare every day I did my best to add to our coffers) but after eight or nine

months, it was with some regrets when we had to pack our bags and leave what my youngest had by then labelled *Washing Machine House* (because the particularly loud machine seemed to be banging on whenever we were in the place together).

I also have somewhat pained memories of the day we transferred, lock-stock-and barrel, from Cornwall to London. As it happened, the rest of the crew had gone on ahead, by train, and I can see myself now, on a car-jammed M4 motorway heading towards London, in the current low-budget, pillar-box red, hatch-back work-horse. It was teaming rain, and the car was packed to the rafters, with barely enough space for me to exist without suffocating, behind the wheel. On top of all that, I had injured my back just before leaving Cornwall, and was given strict instructions by a seemingly knowledgeable medical person, to stop, get out, and move around at every available roadside service-centre - places which, with their plastic trays and inedible chips, seemed to out-do the worst of Australia - as often as possible during my five-or-six-hour journey. This was a formidable experience, to be recounted but never repeated ... in this life, or the next!

During that four-month stay in the Muswell Hill district of London, the red car was sold, and an even cheaper, similar sized model came on board: a dark brown chocolatey-coloured *Triumph Toledo* (probably worth a mint today as a collector's item). Again, my youngest daughter - a toddler with flowing blonde locks and an obvious gift for labels - nicknamed it *Funny Brown Car*, which, with a floating rear bench seat, lack of working safety belts and extremely audible exhaust, was on reflection a fairly apt description. After purchasing this rather unique machine from a young, upwardly mobile veterinary surgeon, in a rural area north of the city, I recall driving along the North Circular with no registration and no insurance, before pulling into the kerb and proudly presenting it to family outside *Washing Machine House*. My youngest adored the vehicle; the older ones with some element of reason, were aghast. At £200, I thought it was a snip.

But back to the immediacy of today: our second home-coming, this time via Singapore. On Mondeo cruise-control, we swept on down the M4, turning off after about an hour, to head towards Cheltenham in the Cotswolds, our destination. We stopped for a breather and brunch at a slate-floored, stone-walled pub, which had apparently existed on that

site for around 500 years; there was a lush green lawn at the front and small white wooden bridges straddling a gurgling brook, where the children could play. It was picturesque, and represented the vision which had underpinned our return to the April springtime of Wordsworth's England.

Unfortunately for us, that chocolate-box vision would last for only about one more hour. The job-exchange which my partner had secured was arranged with a woman who lived in Cheltenham, but worked in a Psychiatric hospital in neighbouring Gloucester. Her job location should perhaps have warned us! The lady had advertised her house as a *Country Cottage*, but when we pulled up outside, this was quite clearly *not* the case. Unless our eyes deceived us, this *country cottage* had morphed into a rather down-and-out terraced place in Whaddon, one of Cheltenham's less salubrious suburbs. It was in fact early April when we arrived, and though the place boasted a dark ivy creeper covering much of its front wall, this was certainly no idyllic rural dwelling, as closer inspection of the dirt-encrusted, insect infested kitchen, was soon to confirm! The exchange lady (who shall remain nameless) inherited our modest 1930s bungalow in Adelaide; which sprawled across the usual quarter-acre block. Compared to the hovel we found in Whaddon she had won herself a queen's palace.

Undeterred, and showing our '*she'll be right mate*' Aussie indomitable nature, we soldiered on regardless, cleaned up the house, got the girls into school, then started to get to know an intriguing clique of neighbours. One prematurely white-haired guy called Don, whom I immediately identified with, was a teacher at the girl's school who had spent two years on VSO, in Bangladesh; his wife was Bangladeshi and now their five-year-old daughter was in the same class as our little one. Don intrigued me because come the heady days of summer, or misery of English winter, he always wore open sandals. Only once in many years did I see him wearing shoes - for a job interview as headmaster of a school for troublesome youngsters - and I could never work out whether it was a throwback to days in Bangladesh, or that he had some problem with smelly feet. Like B.O., it could be a tricky subject, which I stayed away from.

Our rapidly blossoming friendship was almost undone by Don's wife, when I made the mistake of offering a car I'd just purchased at auction, for her to practice driving skills, with me sitting alongside as mentor. I soon found out why her husband had been reluctant to do the same, when after a reasonably competent start and only about five minutes into the first *lesson*, we rounded a sharp bend and drove straight into a brick wall! I recall sitting speechless for a few seconds looking across at *Roshni*, who sat in a rather dazed stupor; hands still glued to the steering wheel.

But unlike that previous attempt to achieve settlement in the motherland, this time I did manage to gain employment of sorts, which followed on from the recent Singapore experience, in a similar vein of TEFL teaching (Teaching English as a Foreign language). Well known as a vocation reserved for twenty-something year-olds, TEFL often enables youngsters to travel the world before thinking about doing something more serious: a real job, some would say! Yet here I was, well into my forties and beginning a career which perhaps I should have started about a quarter of a century before, when I first sought out my British roots. In some ways I was cut out for it; being innovative and arty, I could make good use of widely varied templates, from Shakespeare's *To be, or not to be*, through to Tina Turner's *Simply the Best* poetry; but while I could not claim the charisma of either Ms Turner or Sir Lawrence, nevertheless my offbeat methods seemed to work, and in the case of *Simply the Best*, my class of Japanese schoolgirls won Gold for their costumed presentation, mini-skirted dances and all, during that particular Summer school's wind up concert.

Despite the array of challenges that starting up life in Britain seemed to offer - in particular for a young family coming from a reasonably affluent Australian lifestyle, to something not quite so assured and secure - we were also able to see a range of decided advantages. Cheltenham was (and still is) a small town with a cosmopolitan, somewhat refined air to its daily customs, within the most beautiful setting on the edge of the Cotswold Hills, and perfectly situated to reach a host of other beguiling places. For example, the summer-time TEFL job (mentioned above) included day excursions to Shakespeare's Stratford, The Dreaming Spires of Oxford and the Roman Baths of Bath:

each within an hour's drive North, East and South of Cheltenham, while one hour to the West lay the Welsh Border and beyond that, the eternal beauty of the Welsh mountains. Our weekend jaunts to heritage-listed Youth Hostels might find us dining at a 20-seater oakwood banquet table, that had been used by lords of the manor as they flung their leg bone to waiting hounds, centuries before Cook set foot on Botany Bay's beach. All that, and much more – The Literature Festival, Jazz Festival, Cheltenham Race Week - were on our doorstep, and beyond that lay the excitement of London, and across the channel of course, a million other intrigues. At the time, the wonders outweighed the stumbling blocks, by about ten to one!

And so it came perhaps as no surprise, when just six months after leaving a wet and chilly Cheltenham and returning to our Australian safe haven, I returned once again, as the family's forward scout, to resume TEFL teaching and set up a better home base in an area of the town with particularly good schools. A few months later I flew back to Adelaide, to collect my daughters, shepherding them to Britain in September of that year, in readiness for the new school year. The older one in particular, was not amused by the whole affair; she was leaving her known base and circle of friend behind, and cried for what seemed like hours, after we left the Australian tarmac, bound for Singapore. The younger one carried on regardless, naming Changi airport *The Asian Disneyland*, which I thought at the time was not such a bad description.

And indeed, each of us took time to adjust, but this time we finally made it, remaining in Britain, becoming confirmed Britons, for the next decade. Good jobs, respected schools and the best universities followed. In the end it turned out that my partner and I had made a wise decision, for ourselves and our children.

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