100 FLIGHTS

A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS WRITTEN ON AIRPLANES

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One hundred special thanks to everyone I flew with this year, everyone I flew to, and everyone else who gave me wings.

Author's Preface

So I wouldn't go out of my way to say that you should *definitely* read the following introduction (because who reads intros anyway), but I *would* go out of my way to say that it's probably the only place where you'll find any context whatsoever regarding the premise of this book. For those who *really* know me well personally, however, I'd like to offer the option of reading this part later on if you're feeling romantic and/or keen on figuring things out with me as you go, and in that case I'd recommend jumping right over to the first chapter and then looping back to this intro after Chapter 15. (I'll leave a reminder there, too.) If not, and you'd prefer to know what this thing is all about straight away (which is probably necessary and a much better idea), there's absolutely no problem in feeding that curiosity. Either way, this is just a cutesy little chance to choose your own adventure, and I'm just pleased you're here, so do whatever the eff you want.

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Introduction

From 28 July 2017 to 27 July 2018, I was a passenger on one hundred flights.

The first feeling I get after saying that is mild disappointment, but only because I've just spoiled the titular line of this project.[1] But while I'm already spoiling things, I should probably also mention that I ended up topping off at a grand total of 103 flights due to an extra trip I booked right before the cutoff in case anything crazy or unexpected happened down the stretch. Fortunately, everything went according to plan and I happily hopped on those bonus flights as the happiest clam ever, having reached my happy goal of 100. (Side note: not all clams are happy, so it probably isn't great for the mental health of clams to set those expectations.)

Anyway, the second thing I think about after hitting a full centum of flights is what it took to get on a plane that many times. I mean, for someone who is neither a pilot, nor a flight attendant, nor someone who commutes between two major cities on a regular basis for whatever reason, this was a *task*. It doesn't even matter if you're private-jet-pimpin' (as opposed to frequent-frugal-flying like me), because taking an average of two flights per week for an entire year is a shit ton of traveling. That said, to continue with my theme of spoilers, I want to be fully aboveboard about how all of it came to be, including the numbers.

For starters, here's what you really want to know (complete with endless qualifiers): through a combination of an extremely favorable geographic home base for low-cost travel in and out of Berlin's two airports, a wild dedication to putting in longer hours during the workweek in order to make more weekend trips possible, a decently flexible and indefatigable attitude, an obsessive amount of looking up flights (coupled with an offensive amount of spreadsheets), and an utterly *game-changing* masterstroke of luck when Air Berlin went insolvent and

EasyJet stepped in with an impeccably well-timed acquisition deal to lease its aircrafts and take over its landing slots in Berlin (thus leading to a feast of inexpensive, introductory flights), the total airfare I paid for all 100 of my flights was €4,915 EUR (roughly $5,800 USD based on the exchange rates throughout the year).

Not too shabby, right?

It also gets better, because when you take out the 15 flight legs I ~~had to~~ wanted to book for intercontinental trips to (A) be a groomsman at my college best friend's wedding, (B) spend Christmas with my parents, (C) go to Rio to fulfill a work contract during Carnaval, (D) help throw my brother's bachelor party, and (E) return for my brother's subsequent wedding, the average price I paid for those remaining 85 flights comes out to €24.50 EUR (or $29 USD) per flight.

I know.

So even at a volume of one hundred, you can imagine how surprisingly affordable this entire thing was—especially when you tack on a highly reluctant attitude toward spending money on anything other than rent, food, flights, public transportation, and shitty accommodations anywhere I went, but especially when I was traveling alone, which was most of the time.

Sure, okay, but what is this book?

Well, on flight 35 (which I did not know was flight number 35 at the time), I decided out of the blue that I was going to write a revival edition of the column I once had in college as the senior columnist for my university's newspaper

(which happened to be the Society of Professional Journalists' top-ranked collegiate non-daily in the country at the time—*though not because of me, jeez, stay in your lane*). I started writing on that flight without thinking too much about what I was doing, just imagining it to be a fun little gift that I would send to the 20 or so people I knew used to follow my column and with whom I was still in touch five years, three time zones, and two continents of my life later.

On flight 43, I wrote another one. And two more by 48.

Then I really started getting into it, even researching and preparing material ahead of time.

By flight 67, I realized (thanks to all of my spreadsheets) that I had the unusual chance to hit 100 flights in a year, which was completely unrelated to my tenth new column at the time. In fact, none of my columns were strictly related to my travels at that point, because I was still just writing about random topics like I used to when it was my job.

Shortly after flight 78, I committed to making it to triple digit flights in a year, and my best shot was to cover the remaining 22 flights over the following 50 days.

And finally, by flight 87 I realized that all of this was connected and that I had been writing a book.

This book is a compilation of similarly styled and loosely sequential essays written while flying on those airplanes. It's about what a person's head might go through when exposed to a huge number of different places in rapid succession,

and it's simultaneously about the tedious amount of time it takes (doing the same thing over and over) in order to get to those places. It is as much of an outlet for purging excess thoughts and observations as it is an attempt at finding a shareable format that could potentially be as relatable, useful, entertaining, thought-provoking, and sometimes as frustrating as the real thing.

Throughout the early chapters, you'll often see me referring to my 'column' directly, which I continued to do so for the sake of continuity since it *was*, in fact, a column once, and not for the sake of some self-righteous need to be above the 'blog' word (which is what most people today would call it for lack of a better term).[2] In some ways it could be called an anthology by one author, but in that case I guess it's just a collection. You know what? Who cares, because not knowing what to call it probably pairs nicely with how abundantly clear it is/was that I didn't know what I was doing until much later anyway. Again, at first I thought I was just writing for a handful of people I knew, and that probably explains why I was talking about myself so much.

I've thought about going back after the fact and updating things (thus ruining the integrity of how everything was written while I was aboard those flights), but I figured I'd just stop messing with it and let the people read.

I mean, *could* I have gone back and changed a lot of stuff? *Sure*.

Did I?

Of course I did.

But only a little.

And that was just to clarify some of the things that would've made zero sense otherwise. The good news is that the early chapters/columns are all pretty short and quick anyway—like my nickname in high school, *ziiiing*. So please, go ahead and breeze and/or power through the first several chapters to get a feel for what's going on and then the rest should take care of itself.

Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned on the 'Fasten Seat Belt' sign. If you haven't already done so, please stow your carry-on items in the overhead bin or under the seat in front of you. Please take your seat and enjoy the flight.

Safe travels.

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I wrote this on a flight from Berlin to Ljubljana, 14 August 2018.

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1. Not that it was going to be a surprise (or even *could have been* a surprise), but isn't it way more fun when the name of a book just sort of pops up somewhere along the way as if the author were winking at the reader? Like, imagine if this were called '*In Plane Words*' and I casually snuck that into Chapter 21 as an Easter egg for later. Could've been sweet. ↑

2. The truth is there's *not* a lack of a better term, since the better term is 'column.' It's just fallen out of the common vernacular because newspapers are hardly a thing anymore—I mean, name one columnist today, I'll wait. ↑

Chapter 1: Column Like I See 'em

I like to think of myself as a fairly non-opinionated person. And even though the people who know me pretty well would probably balk at hearing that, I guess the not-so-clever loophole here is that I just like to make fun of (and/or bitch about) all the things that bother me instead.

I fly a lot; nearly every weekend it seems like lately. And with that kind of regularity, sometimes it feels like I'm flying around from place to place just to gather all of the things that bother me into one big fat collection. Now, that's not to say that I'm bothered by traveling—*definitely not*. In fact, more often than not I find myself traveling alone these days just to keep up with the habit of seeing new places. (And, of course, to keep up with the sparkling image on my Snapstagram. Shoutout to my eleven followers.)

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I haven't written and/or published a column in like five years or so, but my writing voice still sounds familiar to me. That's a pretty neat feeling, but the problem is, I don't really remember where I left off (in case you were with me back then), so that means I don't really know where to pick back up, aside from just recapping the last half-decade in one fell swoop—or maybe a few fell swoops, how about that?

TL;DR: My time in grad school was a blur, my decision to run away to Brazil was a ballsy-ass move, and my recent relocation to Europe has been a completely mixed bag that I'm still trying to figure out.

Okay, let's just get this out of the way. Time for me me me.

Thinking back to my time at Stanford always weirds me out because of how fast all of it happened. And although I'm super proud of picking up my master's shortly after turning 23, holy shit the feeling I had afterward was awful. I mean, maybe it was just the culmination of a lot of things ending for me all at once, but for the first time in my adult life, I guess I didn't know exactly what I'd be doing (or where I'd be going) next, and for whatever reason that lack of direction ended up snowballing into a lot of negativity towards the Silicon Valley lifestyle and California overall. It just wasn't a good look—*plus the only thing anyone ever talked about back then was work and money, and I hated that shit as a 23-year-old*.

Nevertheless, if I hadn't lost it for a bit there, I probably never would've entered whatever psychosis I was in that led me to sabotage some of my biggest work opportunities in the Bay (e.g., the infamous "No thanks, I think I'm moving to Brazil" line I gave during my final round interview at Google—which I apparently *still* need to tell people about as if it were my own form of being an insufferable vegan who can never shut up about it despite how I'm probably just seeking approval and validation for that decision). So anyway, it was that, among other things, which ultimately led me to raise the white flag and give in to the voice in my head telling me to get the hell out of California.

Am I over it? Yes.

Do I still think about it sometimes? Also yes.

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I had no well-thought-out reason for moving to Brazil. The first time I had ever been there was merely the year before, and that was only because I had managed to ~~convince~~ persuade my classmates into ~~persuading~~ convincing our program director that it was a good idea to send a group of us to Rio de Janeiro for a week's worth of research. I even missed an earlier meeting when everyone agreed (without me) that we would be doing our research in Prague and Vienna, however by the end of the next day I had already gotten enough of them on board to change the plan. (If I recall correctly, I must've swayed them with the weather forecasts and by bringing up the world-famous beaches, but the truth is I was secretly curious about going to Rio for networking purposes because both the World Cup and the Olympic Games were going to be happening there within two or three years, and I was once a doe-eyed sports journalist wannabe, so that's why I was pulling for it.)

We were only there for eight days that trip. On one of those days I took a bus to São Paulo by myself to meet with a university professor who never showed up despite having confirmed with me via email just two hours prior. She was the only English-speaking contact I had in the city (which is the largest city in the southern hemisphere, by the way), and I still haven't heard back from her ever since.

During my return to Rio the next day, the six-hour bus ride took more than ten. It also included a torrential rainstorm, some cops with assault rifles, an old man passenger who had to get up from his seat so that one of the cops could literally cut it open in search of the good stuff… and an overall passing grade from me in terms of thrilling experiences. *I liked it.*

The next year I moved to Rio with no plan, no job, no friends, no home, and no functional knowledge of Portuguese whatsoever. I wrote a letter to my dad about why I was doing this and why I was hoping to get his blind support—especially when it came to breaking the news to my mom—because it made absolutely no sense and we all knew it.

I woke up one day two years later and everything had flipped. I had made some nice friends in a couple different groups throughout the city, I had stumbled into some unforgettable work experiences for both Snapchat and the Olympics, and I lived in a cozy little flat near the beach (in a building that totally looked like a crack house but was in the best damn location I could possibly imagine). Furthermore, at that time I had also gotten pretty good at ~~humblebragging~~ speaking Portuguese despite never taking a formal lesson (although my immigration documents might have suggested otherwise, but that's got to do with some unsavory details that I prefer to save for more personal, 'irl' conversations).

So after a total of three years, I left Brazil feeling like I was retiring as the champ. I also left because I felt like two mornings per month of hearing gunshots in the distance outside of my bedroom window were two too many. (Honestly, the violence *did* seem to pick up a bit after the Olympics, but my decision to bounce probably had more to do with my feeling that I had somehow accomplished the things I had set out to accomplish whether or not I had truly "set out" to accomplish anything in the first place.) That said, returning to the States after a life experience like that was not something I was at all interested in doing. *No way, Jose.* You can take your American dream and shove it.

My next move took me to Berlin, Germany, which is the exact god-damned opposite of Rio, holy shitballs. As I mentioned earlier, I'm still figuring some things out in Europe, and Berlin takes a lot of getting used to.

Side note: I'm not even going to get into what it's been like trying to teach myself German the same way I managed it with Portuguese, since (A) it's way harder for me, (B) it's not as necessary for getting by, and (C) it's not as pressing as some of the other frustrations that have popped up a bit sooner. So let's dig into those instead.

First of all, I'm a fairly patient guy when it comes to common annoyances like

heavy traffic, long restroom queues, and choosing the slowest airport security lane every single time—but wow, some of Berlin's random impracticalities have really made me break character. This is what I meant earlier when I said that it felt like I was making a collection of stuff that bothers me. Here we go.

I'm bothered by how only ~40 percent of storefronts in Berlin accept credit cards, *including* the ones that have 20 euro minimums. It's like, "So let me get this straight: you're telling me that I have to go out of my way to make sure I have something temporary (cash) with me at all times instead of just carrying one permanent thing (card), and on top of this, I not only have to do math if I care about getting the correct amount of change back, but I also need to have a place to keep all of those dirty coins?" Holy hell that peeves me. Seriously, do you know how many times I've witnessed customers straight up *apologizing* to store owners when they ask to pay by card? This is why the dinosaurs are extinct.

I'm also bothered by whatever weird-ass reason causes Berliners to sit in the aisle seats of otherwise empty two-person benches in trains (and metros and buses and trams), leaving the window seats vacant yet inaccessible (since that would require asking, and it's against German customs to speak on public transportation, *let alone make eye contact with anyone*, because that makes people uncomfortable). Usually I just try to gesture politely to avoid causing a scene, you know, by talking.

(To be fair, there is one explanation I've heard a few times as to why they sit on the outside seats, and it's seemingly because they don't want to feel boxed in, so it's essentially a matter of personal space. Unfortunately, however, I'm not convinced. "*Boxed in?* This is a crowded metro, and we're *already* inside of a giant box, you goof. Here's a thought: please scooch over and let other people sit, otherwise I'm gonna have to ask you if the seat next to you is reserved for that little bag you put on it, and I'm also gonna have to ask it, like, really loudly. It's going to be *so* uncomfortable.")

I'm bothered by the senseless compliance of everyone in Berlin pointlessly waiting at red crosswalk signals when it's perfectly safe to cross. My most painful example is the one where literally all traffic is stopped for one single tram that can only go in one single direction (aka straight ahead on its one single track), which means the crosswalk that runs parallel to that tram is one hundred percent untouchable and perfectly safe to cross (because again, literally all other traffic is stopped for the tram), and yet I'm the asshole for not waiting for no reason? This drives me nuts. Do you want to know how to escape from a knife-wielding mugger on the streets of Berlin? You just jaywalk.

Don't get me wrong, I'm all for having good manners and setting good examples for children, but isn't this the exact kind of mindlessness and lack of critical thinking that teaches them *not* to be accountable for their own safety? I mean, just staring at a signal until it turns green before automatically going sounds way less safe to me than looking both ways no matter what color the light happens to be. Seriously, all you have to do is ask yourself two questions: (A) is it safe for me to cross the street, and (B) am I certain that my crossing will not infringe upon the safety of anyone else? If you've answered yes to both of these questions, then for fuck's sake, live your life and cross the damn street.

Side note: before it's too late, I should probably try to dispel the notion of me being ignorant due to the whole "something is different and therefore it's bad" trap card. I'm ignorant for far better reasons than that. In any case, this time it's just a matter of things being totally inefficient when they really don't have to be (which was not what I expected when I first moved to Germany). And sure, at the end of the day, it's nice when everyone abides by the same unwritten rules to keep society in order, but damn, it'd also be nice to consider updating those rules once in a half-century or something.

So yeah, I don't know. Clearly my adjustment to Europe and/or Berlin hasn't been as smooth as I hoped it would be, but I guess that's what happens when you preface it with three years in South America. In any case, I *do* seem to be traveling around a lot in response to all of this so-called culture shock, so I really

have nothing to complain about (*besides all of the things I just complained about*). And don't get me wrong, because despite my recalcitrant attitude, I'm still happy with my move to Germany overall. I mean, I'm pretty sure that I would've made the same decision a second time if given the choice, it's just that I may not have chosen Berlin a second time because it doesn't seem to fit me very well. Then again, that's *kinda* what I was looking for in a new city when I decided to move there—or should I say "when I decided to move *here*," since my flight is just about to land.

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I wrote this on a flight from Milan to Berlin, 6 December 2017.

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Chapter 2: Paternity Stay

Barreling towards the end of my 20s has got me thinking way too much about life goals and just what the hell I'm doing with myself. I guess I'm officially in that super cliché phase of constantly over-analyzing things, and just when I thought it had reached the point of becoming unhealthy… it probably did. (Where were you when the existential dread set in?)

When I say life goals I mean the big honking things that we want for ourselves. At the end of the day, that's what it's all about, isn't it: what *I* want... Why do we do stuff? Because we want stuff.

Here's what I want: I want to be a stay-at-home/work-from-home dad raising kids. I assume this requires a lot of time off, so I want to have the financial stability to support that—perhaps even some passive income if I'm really lucky. I want to keep writing as a side hobby, and hopefully turn it into something meaningful and/or relevant someday (be it related to academics or purely for entertainment purposes). I want to have a dog named Griffey after my favorite baseball player when I was growing up. Lastly (and I have no idea why I want this, or even if I actually *do* want this, but), at some point down the line I want to 'own' and/or be friends with a horse. It would most likely need to be cared for by professionals (who know what they're doing and everything), but I'd come visit the stable at least twice a week or something and try to learn. That's basically it.

And even though that's not the fanciest list in the world, I guess the tricky part is ultimately how to bankroll it anyway (assuming the sugar mama angle is unrealistic). The thing is, when it comes down to it, I don't think I've ever really cared about trying to be rich, and that might pose a problem because I sure as hell care if my kids are. (I mean, they don't need to be rich per se, but it's

important to me that they have everything they need and more, you know what I mean?) Still, in many ways, sometimes I think deep down that I want to be a dad so badly because that's when I'll finally be able to stop wanting things for myself and start wanting things for them instead. Is that somehow hypocritical and/or contradictory (since it's still me wanting something in the end)? I have no idea. Probably. I suppose in that case, yes, I'm assigning the idea of me raising children to be a source of my own utility rather than theirs—but can't it be both? I hope so. Probably.

On the topic of dads and overthinking, today I've decided to prod as far into daddy issues as I think they go for me. Right off the bat, I've already admitted to too many friends that I don't expect my father to be around for much longer. (He doesn't have any terminal medical problems or anything like that, but he's just a great example of stereotypically bad American habits.) I also only get to see him a couple times per year considering I live 5,000 miles away, so it makes sense that he looks like he's aging faster than he probably is. Either way, he just doesn't seem to care about his health as much as *I* care about his health, and I guess that explains why I feel like there's a ticking time bomb in his heart (right next to the stents) waiting to go off.

I rehearse having these kinds of conversations with him in my head all the time, and I rehearse having outbursts about it in my head as well. Meanwhile, I also don't want to make the one or two times I get to see my parents per year revolve around this topic, so it's a tough situation to figure out. And sure, at the end of the day it's his prerogative to live his life how he wants and that's okay because he's totally earned it; it's just the adult part of me that still isn't prepared to see him go.

Like it or not, there comes a day when we all reach the point of being one generation away from having to figure out the rest of our lives on our own (*like that John Mayer 'Stop This Train' song, which I just paraphrased*). As for me, I'll be the first to admit that I'm flat out not ready to take the training wheels off and see my dad go. I'm not ready to lose the frontman behind what makes me so

overly critical and disagreeable at times, or why I put unnecessary pressure on myself due to a stiflingly high need to impress, or why I've had the freedom my entire life in spite of all that to be a cocky little shit. I don't think I would trade that for anything; it's the root of all my achievements when I succeed, and it's the root of all my entitled bitterness that keeps me going whenever I fall short.

There usually comes a time when a parent-child relationship transitions from the parent giving orders to the parent giving advice. Down the line the child grows up and starts giving advice back to the parent, and the ~~turntables~~ tables finally turn when the adult child starts giving their parent orders. An easy example of this is how aging parents will often take advice and eventually orders when it comes to anything tech-related. The harder examples, such as lifestyle choices, are much tougher. As for my father, he's such a self-assured man that I imagine he'll resist taking most of my advice until the bitter end. It's funny because he's even mentioned several times out loud that he expects his three children to know better than him by now—but I still have my doubts on whether or not he'll ever put that to good use. *The man still climbs ladders in the dark to do housework for fuck's sake.*

Still, above all else, I think my biggest trouble with my father is that I feel like I can't relate to him as much as I used to, especially when it comes to the notion of "here we are in our late 20s, here's what we're doing, and here's what we actually want." I have zero idea what my father wanted when he was closing in on turning 30 (if he remembers), and I also have no idea if he did anything to cope with it, or if he just coasted in a routine. If, at the very least, he had a premeditated family-oriented type of life goal to become a provider (after growing up with jack shit and nothing to inherit), he kinda nailed that.

Side note: in case it wasn't clear, I'm obviously going to chat with him about all of this again. Don't be ridiculous. In fact, I'll probably call him as soon as I get off the plane that I'm currently on, but like I said before, I just don't want every conversation I have with him to be about this, especially if my time with him is limited.

So anyway, back to big honking life goals. I think it's a bit complicated for me that one of my top goals is to become a dad, since I can't exactly work towards becoming a father (assuming I want it in the traditional sense as opposed to taking the Cristiano Ronaldo route of surrogates or whatever). When it comes to the other goals, however, reaching my late 20s has really started to make me wonder if the things that I'm doing in my daily routine are helping me get any closer to them—and in most cases I'd probably say no, because most people's day-to-day activities and responsibilities will never accomplish their goals for them. It's like, if you want to be a famous singer, you're not going to become one just by doing your regular routine of non-singer things and hoping that someone stops you on the street one day to hand you the opportunity of a lifetime. There's no sympathy for people who have distinct goals yet do nothing in their daily lives to actively approach them. You don't get chances. You take them.

Fuck you, Dad.[1]

Look, all I want is my father to take better care of himself, see how good it feels, and make a habit of it. I also want him to stick around for a bit longer so I can cheat off his homework.

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I wrote this on a flight from Rome to Berlin, 14 January 2018.

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1. Obvious joke. I shouldn't have needed to footnote this. You can scroll back up now. ↑

Chapter 3: HQOC (High Quality Original Content)

So I guess my column is sort of back now, and I've quickly rediscovered that I need to be coming up with ideas for things to write about again. I kinda forgot about that part. I also waited until the eleventh hour to come up with something for this one, and that means for the first time my column is going to be about... wait for it... nothing in particular.

Okay, maybe this isn't the first time. And maybe they're all about nothing in particular. Either way, whatever the topic ends up being, I just hope that the final product turns out to be entertaining (or at least provocative).

And this might sound super redundant or self-explanatory, but I think it's weird how much influence the decision of what to write about has on the end result even though you make it at the beginning. I mean, you don't always have to have an end in mind, but you *do* always have to have somewhere to start. So like, you deliberate until something comes from nothing (or you ramble incoherently until you figure out what you want to talk about), and sometimes that something can be pretty cool. The thing is, as with most decisions, we can't always tell if they were good ones until after the fact, but it sure feels nice when they are, though.

If you could choose to get better at anything, I suppose the best thing you could possibly choose is to get better at decision-making; it'd be like having a genie that allows you to wish for more than three wishes. I mean, the most successful people in just about every category of life are successful because of impeccable decision-making, aren't they? Wealthy businesspersons as a category must be great decision-makers (*ignoring the ones that would make terrible ethics professors*). The world's best artists and designers have well-trained eyes and a knack for creativity, but surely it's their decision-making that brings out the best

of their skills. Athletes may be exceptionally gifted physically, but it's their decision-making and their understanding of their bodies' capabilities and proprioception (aka acute awareness of their own movement and body position in time and space) that makes individuals like LeBron James so extraordinary.

And sure, maybe it's easier to make the decision to dunk a basketball when you're 6'8'' and 250 lbs, but for us normal people, these decisions don't just happen. So how do we make our choices? What makes us choose? And can we get better at it? (It's best to avoid going down the rabbithole of free will vs. determinism here, because either way, "choices" happen. Just don't think about it.)

I think we can definitely get better at decision-making, and I imagine it comes down to the same way we get better at most things: practice. If we force it, we can practice making decisions and get better through repetition and evaluation of the results. I didn't have a topic when I started writing, but at least I forced myself to make a decision, which I did at some point around the seventh or eighth sentence. (Don't bother going back to reread it, there's no hidden message or anything. I'm not that good.) It also remains to be seen if I made a wise decision.

I think the key to practicing decision-making is to do it on our own, actively, and when we otherwise don't even need to be making decisions. That way, we can turn mundane and otherwise useless situations into something useful. I have an incredibly stupid example of something I came up with a couple of years ago, and I have no idea if it helps or not.

So there's this imaginary game that you can play whenever you're on public transportation, and I like to call it, "*If you had to*." The way this game works is sort of similar to the "Would you rather" game,[1] or the "Marry, fuck, kill" game,[2] in that you have some perverted options presented to you and you have to do the mental exercise of choosing.

The core concept of *If you had to* is to answer the question, "If you absolutely had to bang one person from this particular subway ride, who would it be?"

Side note: Okay, first of all, don't get all high and mighty on me by pretending that the world isn't so superficial. I'm not the first to point out that the physical appearance of another person's face is usually the first barrier in deciding whether or not you'd put your mouth on their genitals. Just get over it so we can move on.

So anyway, the beauty of this game comes from the fact that we almost never see the same people on the subway twice, so every ride is different and it's a fresh game every time. But there are rules. Lots of 'em.

The first rule is that you can only choose once, and your choice is final the moment you make it.

The second rule is that the person you choose must be in the same subway car/carriage as you at the time of your decision, and no picking from people standing on the platforms outside at the stations, *you ponce*.

Now, please consider that most people in subway cars generally stand or sit in one position throughout their entire ride. If a potential choice makes a movement that indicates getting off at the next stop, such as standing up or stepping closer to the doors, this person is immediately excluded from your selection contention. Sorry Charlie, that ship has sailed.

The next rule is the core dilemma and inspiration for the name of the game. *You have to choose*. If the kinda-okay-but-not-so-great-looking option motions to leave, and you're left with a handful of rotten apples or simply members of your non-preferred gender, it looks like you're brown baggin' it today because you've missed your chance, pal. Still, depending on the length of your journey and popular stops, you can also strategically hold out in hopes that a super hot person gets on and rescues you at a later stop.

Got it? Good. Time to practice your decision-making:

Do you bite the bullet early and choose a 6 out of 10 only to feel crushed when a 9 walks on later, *or,* do you wait around until the 6 motions to leave and then see nothing better than a 3 for the rest of the journey? It's a constant struggle; no matter how many poisons of catch-22 you think you can pick, you're always going to be making Sophie's choice between a rock and a hard place.

I love how difficult this game is, and I swear I'm really good at it by now.

"But wait," you might be saying. *"How can you be good at a game that is almost entirely random?"*

How should I know, damn it? At least I'm out there practicing, and that's what counts.

Okay, look, I already admitted that this was a stupid game, but the nice part about it is how easy it is to know if you've won or lost: did you or did you not choose the most desirable person (in your subjective opinion) from the journey? That's a yes or a no answer. Now, assuming you're anything like me, did you

talk to this person at any moment? Of course you didn't.[3] Neither did I. But that's not the point. The point is, you've just upgraded yourself from being a total creeper on the subway to being a total creeper on the subway with kick-ass decision-making skills. You can take that to the bank.

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I wrote this on a flight from Paris to Berlin, 28 January 2018.

XXX

1. E.g., would you rather wipe your butt with sandpaper after every time you go to the bathroom, or never wipe with anything at all? ↑

2. E.g., Monica, Rachel, and Phoebe from Friends. This one has a correct answer, though. You can toss up who you want to kill or bang between Monica and Phoebe depending if you prefer Monica's looks to Phoebe's kinkiness, but you gotta lock down that Rachel girl for life with the marry. Don't even argue. ↑

3. Coward. ↑

Chapter 4: A Little Face Called Aspen

Story time.

I've never compiled a bucket list before, but I was thinking about making one earlier this week after I managed to do something that would've been a stone cold lock at the top; I went to see Dave Chappelle perform live stand-up at a comedy club. I don't know what it is, but there's something about that guy's control of a room that really sticks out to me. Even some of his bigshot comedian peers (like Chris Rock and Kevin Hart) have publicly called him the greatest, and no one else (who isn't dead) seems to get that label.

The show I attended was outstanding from start to finish. There was an opening act by Neal Brennan (the co-creator of Chappelle's Show), a closing musical performance by Mos Def, and apparently Kanye West was in the building as well. (He didn't make an appearance or anything, but it's worth mentioning because Kanye would've wanted me to.) Still, regardless of all that, Dave came out like gangbusters and knocked everyone dead with his set. Seriously, it was really good, and I'm just glad I got to see him perform (in Berlin of all places) so that I could cross it off my imaginary list.

Another buckety goal of mine has always been to go skiing in France, Austria, Italy, and Switzerland at least one time each in my life. As fate would have it, I happened to get started on that goal the very next day after the comedy show (which is probably what prompted me to start thinking about bucket lists in the first place.)

You know, even while living in central Europe, it's a lot trickier to get to some of those ski areas than I had previously imagined (unless you're driving half a day, or paying the premium to fly into Innsbruck). In my case, I decided to go

with a roundabout, baller-on-a-budget strategy which ultimately led me to touch the ground in four different countries on the same exact day: I woke up at my flat in Berlin, Germany, flew to Copenhagen, Denmark for a cheap layover (that I promptly offset by buying breakfast at the airport), then I connected back down to Geneva, Switzerland (where I ate lunch for the cost of a frickin' Rolex), and finally I caught a bus (for seven Euro, baby) to the French Alps.

My eventual destination was the ski resort town of Chamonix-Mont-Blanc, which boasts the highest European summit west of Russia. I don't have much to say about the skiing other than that it was nothing short of excellent and the views were breathtaking. The mountains themselves were all impressively jagged and aesthetic too, so it felt like you were looking at the Matterhorn in every direction—and this is coming from someone who has never even seen the Matterhorn, but that doesn't really matter… horn.

Anyway, one of the nights in Chamonix included the following story that I've been clearing my throat with dad jokes (and showing off how obnoxiously well-traveled I am) instead of telling:

So it was about 11pm or midnight, and I was heading out to the city center with my Brazilian buddy Ramon. The village itself was super tiny and most (if not all) of its bars were on the same street. After popping in and out of a few ritzy places, Ramon and I settled on the seediest dive bar we could find. Fittingly, no more than two minutes after entering, we came across an older, bald, French man who had just yanked on the hair of some girl to get her attention (as if it were some manly act of courtship).

Now, without taking an unnecessary shot at bald dudes, I'm a guy who usually has long hair. That said, I'm pretty sure you don't need to have long hair to know that it isn't a pleasant feeling to have it pulled unexpectedly. So, naturally the girl was annoyed, and she told *Baldilocks* to get lost. Unfortunately, he didn't take the hint, and after a minute he went back for round two. And I don't speak

French, but I think this time she told him to go bonjour himself.

Prince *Harming* didn't exactly like that, and at this point I had been watching everything unfold for so long that it was either time for me to buy tickets to the show, or time for me to get involved. Hence, when he inevitably gestured towards her for the third time, I took a step in between them and gave him a look that said, "Ay bruh, that's enough."

That was it; fairly plain and altogether non-confrontational, right? Can't say that about his response.

The moment I turned away—and with no chance to avoid a suckerpunch—he pulled me back *by my hair* and then promptly smashed his whiskey glass on my face. Please keep in mind that I had issued no physical contact at this point whatsoever, and this French man had just broken a glass on my face.

Predictably, there was a small skirmish involving me, him, his friend, and eventually Ramon, but that didn't last long before ~~my face~~ the crowd broke it up. Honestly, I didn't even throw any punches or anything (had I bothered to), because at that point I was more concerned with getting to the bathroom to assess the damage. I mean, come on, it's my face.

It took a few minutes to wash the blood off, and afterward I found three significant nicks on my outer mug, and two more on the inside of my mouth. With my night pretty much ruined, I left the bar and called up the receptionist Ramon had introduced me to at a nearby all-inclusive ski hotel (with free food and drinks) that I had been slipping into the entire weekend—which was Ramon's idea, not mine. (Sorry Ramon, I can't look like a bloody bum *and* a cheapskate.)

So I asked her if there were any antiseptic wipes or whatever that she could get her hands on at such a late hour, and fortunately there were. She also thought I was making the whole thing up as a sleazy attempt to get her out of (and/or into) bed, but as soon as she saw my face she both believed me and never wanted to see my face again. (Meanwhile, Ramon was still back at the bar, single-handedly infiltrating a bachelorette party that walked in right after the fracas. *Classic Ramon.* I've honestly never met anyone so fearless in the face of bar-scene rejection. Like, even if it had been *his* face all busted up, he probably would've stuck around just to take his chances with this pack of girls. Shooters shoot, I guess.)

So I suppose that's where the story ends, and looking back on it now, I don't know how I didn't see it coming. I mean, if somebody gestures to you that you ought to have more respect for women, you're clearly out of options and have no choice but to break a glass on that person's face, am I right? Seriously, though, I'm not even sure how to evaluate my decision-making in this scenario. Like, this poor girl didn't deserve that, and we all know the bystander effect is real, so I was just trying to Gandhi that shit by being the change I wanted to see. (Turned out great for both of us.)

And in case you're wondering if anything ever happened to that bald guy (*the French one, not Gandhi*), I'm not sure. Ramon says he thinks some authority figures showed up and couldn't make sense of the story. In the end, I imagine that he faced zero consequences and probably went home thinking that what he did was awesome. Meanwhile, I went home thinking about that line from Dumb and Dumber: "I don't know, Lloyd, the French are assholes."

I suppose it *would* be pretty easy to just write it off as France's fault for the laissez-faire attitude (*get it?*) that permits a man to behave how he did before and after the moment I stepped in, but that's probably unfair. Just as you shouldn't blame the dog for having fleas, it's not all French people's fault that a few of them stink—whether or not they wear deodorant. (There, *now* we're even.)

Honestly, I guess there's just too many people in the world for us to be able to do anything about the shitty ones. (Then again, maybe a lot of them think that we're the shitty ones.)

But seriously, it's kind of harrowing to think about how lucky I was that things didn't end up far worse than they did. Like, I could have taken a direct hit of glass to the eye, and if any of my cuts had been really deep, maybe I would've been in serious danger, or perhaps damaged my vision permanently, I don't know. As it stands, I still have to walk around for the rest of my life with at least one or two tiny scars from something so unbelievably stupid and definitely not worth white-knighting over—especially because I never even talked to the girl who got her hair pulled first, so I have no idea if what I did even mattered to her.

Either way I certainly won't be doing anything like that ever again, since, you know, it's my face. *Did I mention a guy broke a glass on it?* That's not a very good bucket list item, in case you were wondering. And far as my bucket list goes, even if I wanted to put getting into a bar fight on it, there's no way I would ever do so without throwing down in fisticuffs. That's easily the worst part, because now it's just a lame story where the only highlight was the part about Ramon and the bachelorettes (because at least he did something interesting).

Coincidentally, there *is* one kind of fight that I definitely *would* put on my bucket list, and that's one of those giant-ass food fights in a school cafeteria, like the ones you see in movies. That would be so sweet, wouldn't it? Nevertheless, if I had damaged my vision permanently and forever lost the chance to see and/or feel the sweet, saucy satisfaction of tossing a chicken parm sandwich across the room and then watching it knock some guy's lights out, I think that just might make me mad enough to go yank on a few decent people's long hair at a bar.

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I wrote this on a flight from Geneva to Berlin, 4 February 2018.

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Chapter 5: Repetitiously Delicious

They say variety is the spice of life, but repetition is so darn comfortable.

In an attempt to break out of my normal work/home routine, one of the things I've been doing for a while now is skipping town and visiting somewhere new at least every other week. Over the last handful of weekends, I've been to Tenerife, back home to Berlin, Rome, Berlin again, Paris, and Chamonix most recently. Now, seeing as I already know that I won't have a weekend at home in Berlin for another three more, I just realized that I've somehow managed to turn all of that into a routine as well. Hmm…

One very understandable consequence of my travel schedule is that it tends to make dating more difficult (despite how it's not exactly a huge priority for me at this very moment). I'm usually too locked up during the workweek to do anything social, and considering how I'm out of town on half of my weekends, that leaves me pretty un-pindownable altogether. As a result, dating me is like driving a stick shift in a traffic jam, and nobody wants to do that. I mean, even when I do go on proper dates that happen to go fairly well, admitting that I'm not in Berlin very much is usually a dealbreaker for some reason. Go figure.

Naturally, in lieu of having any stability myself, I've made a few adjustments to my dating techniques in an attempt to gain consistency over the small sample size I get to work with. For example, something weird (that I'm willing to admit) about my last several first dates is that they all happened to include virtually the exact same sequence of conversation surrounding the same set of topics, as long as I'd been given the floor to choose.

In that case, I'd usually start out by bringing up whatever German language

peculiarities I had recently found interesting while studying (which I do every day, because, you know, *routine*), but then I'd ultimately steer things toward all of the same general stuff I already ranted about in my first column about Berlin nuisances. (I'm not terribly sure if I actually do/did that kind of thing on purpose —as opposed to just being interested in those topics lately—but for the sake of entertainment let's assume that I'm really that fucking weird, because whatever, I probably am.)

Anyway, my 'rationale' for doing all of this is that I only get a few chances to go on dates these days, so I need to weed out the clear 'incompatibles' as soon as possible to avoid any and all unnecessary second dates. (*Ain't nobody got time for that*.) So, for example, one of the things I'll bring up is the following hypothetical: it's 2am and you're on your way home after a night out with friends. You've just parted ways with them at your respective subway stops, and now you're walking the last few blocks to your place alone. You reach a street intersection with a pedestrian red light. You survey the scene; it's dark out, there are zero cars on the streets, and there are no other pedestrians around you except for maybe one person on the other sidewalk going the other way. When do you cross the street?

Keep in mind we're in Germany here. Also keep in mind that I only go on a fraction of however many dates I've probably made it sound like I go on. Alright, so, on two of those dates, the answer I got was that she would wait until the light turned green.

Unbelievable, right?

Sorry, we're incompatible. *Tchüss*. Next.

Embarrassingly enough, that really is one of the questions I've asked on multiple

dates, and it's starting to get out of hand because, although I'm truly ~~snobby~~ curious about the answer, I can't tell if I actually want to talk about it anymore, or if I'm just too bored to turn off the autopilot. It's like, parroting my own conversation over and over to these poor, unsuspecting ladies is even beginning to wear *me* down.

So why not just stop? Well, I don't think it's that easy. I suppose I *could* just go have a nice first date without falling into the same routine, but I've also got such a great dataset going,[1] so why bother adding the extra variables when I can just keep screening new candidates and see who turns out to be the most fun? At the end of the day, if *I'm* the same guy every time (but only to me), then something's gotta give eventually, right? Hell, I could even kick it up a notch by going to the same restaurant or bar every time, and maybe there's a waiter who'll catch on to the whole scheme and start to give me a covert thumbs up or down based on what he thinks of my date.

Side note: if by some ridiculous chance anyone reading this has actually been on one of these "lucky" dates with me (and now thinks I'm somewhere on the spectrum between pathetic and sociopathic), well, things didn't work out anyway, so bullet dodged, right? All's well that ends well.

But okay look, despite exaggerating things and sounding like I have the hallmark thoughts of a sociopath who needs to return some videotapes,[2] I just wanted to point out that we only view ourselves as creatures of habit because repetition is our default preference and method of operation. Nearly everything we do as adults is routine, and anything noteworthy about our day that we tell our loved ones is usually whatever *broke* that routine. But it's not just *that* we do the same things all the time (because we often have no choice and it makes sense when we have jobs and stuff), but it's also *how* we do those things the *same* way pretty much *every* time.

That's the routine thing that I'm talking about here; it's not simply the

necessities of waking up and going to school, work, or the gym, and it's also not as basic as saying that our routine is made up of whatever we happen to do on a daily basis, like "*Hurr durr, I've eaten food almost every day of my life*." The routine I'm criticizing here is when we get caught doing the exact same things at times when we have the *active* and *available* choice to do something slightly different. The amount of times I'll listen to the same exact Spotify playlist as opposed to trying something new is psychotic. The percentage breakdown of things I'll buy at the grocery store that I *haven't* bought in the past is a sliver of a slice of a pie chart that's not worth eating if it were a real pie, even on a cheat day. We have the choice to pick something else, yet we just hammer the same nails until we're walking flanderizations[3] of ourselves.

Take a second and think about how well (and how often) our limbs and our joints make certain movements based on muscle memory alone, such as how we can effortlessly walk up stairs with perfect clearance to avoid toe-stubbing, or how we can type one-handed on our phones without even looking (*that is, unless you're still two-thumbing it on the default keyboard like a caveperson*.) Our brains make choices based on decision-memory too, and we train it that way for things like efficiency, safety, familiarity, or whatever. Nevertheless, that hard-wiring can also go wrong, and it does go wrong, like, all the time.

The first date bullshit I did was just part of my programming, and it's not like it even went well half of the time. In fact, one of them was so bad it was practically over before it began; it started out with this girl who was going to meet me somewhere she had already been before, but she ended up getting off at the wrong subway station because that was the one she had gotten off the last time she had been to this particular place. She then proceeded to get herself lost (because it was always the wrong station), and then she started arguing with me by saying, "But I *always* go to [this place] from [that road]," which then forced me to leave our intended meeting point just to go find her wherever she was so that she could take us down a wrong, roundabout way (which was hardwired for her) back to the original destination. I don't even know if my explanation did that story justice, but there's more to it, because she even sent me a screenshot of her current location when she was lost, and I went so far as to draw a map for her and send it back with explicit and simple directions, yet this girl just could

not break from the simple familiarity of her previous routine. But you know what? I'm no better than she is. All this girl did was interrupt my routine by overwriting it with hers; I let her shit get in the way of my shit, and I didn't like it.

Incompatible. *Tchüss*. Next.

But why do we do stuff like that all the time? And if we know that breaking routine is what usually ends up being noteworthy, why don't we do it more often? We all seem to know that it's more fun to cross the lines that we shouldn't, and we also all know about the silly little diagram where there's a circle that says, "This is your comfort zone" next to another circle it doesn't intersect with that's labeled, "This is where the magic happens."

I suppose it's either a lack of enthusiasm, bravery, or creativity; we've trained ourselves to understand that being comfortable is the preferred setting, so we resist change and cling to routine. But isn't it all just a matter of taking that negative emotion or fear or hesitation, grabbing ahold of it, and deciding that the associated uncertainty is exactly the thing that makes it exciting? You simply can't be adventurous without taking risks. (I guess that's why I'm suddenly bored by my *own* conversation on a first date, because I've removed the adventure.)

So while we feign publicly that we want things like excitement and spontaneity due to social desirability biases, deep down it seems like all we want is to be free to repeat the things that we like over and over until we find other people whose repetitions are compatible with ours—at least in some aspects. I mean, they say variety is the spice of life, but repetition is so darn comfortable.

Side note: that was originally supposed to be the kicker to wrap things up today,

but this is a long flight and I've got time for one more story about another date gone wrong. Sound good?

Okay, so there's this one part of my routine that I'm super strict about, and it's that I make sure to study a foreign language (in this case German) every single day. On some days I do it much more than others, but as an absolute minimum I require myself to complete daily vocab lessons on the app Duolingo. One of the good things about this particular app is that it's gamified a bit in that you can keep daily streaks going, and I'm closing in on a streak of 300 days in a row right now—so clearly things are getting serious.

Anyway, rewind about a month ago, when I was out having drinks with a girl in Berlin. Sometime around 23:30 I checked my phone and realized that I hadn't done my lessons yet that day. Thus, if I didn't take 15 minutes to complete them, my streak would be over by midnight.

So, clearly I was at a fork in the road, and here's what my thought process was like at the time: do I ignore the streak and continue our date (which is actually going fairly well), or do I explain the whole story about the streak to her and then try to get it done by including her in it somehow or some way?

In other words, do I break routine, or do I hold on for dear life?

As if there were any doubt, I chose the streak, and it did *not* go over very well. I did my best to try to include her and everything, but she was not amused, and it totally flopped. That was essentially the end of our date as well, so we paid the bill and headed outside to go our separate ways—*however*, right before she got in her car to make a literal tire-screeching peel out exit, she turned back to me and said one last thing:

Incompatible. *Tchüss*. Next.

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I wrote this on a flight from Barcelona to New York, 9 February 2018.

XXX

1. There's a pun in here somewhere for dates and data sets. Date-a-set? I don't know, whatever. ↑

2. For the unfamiliar, that's a reference to Patrick Bateman's character in the classic book *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. ↑

3. This is a television trope that happens when one particular personality trait of a character gets so exaggerated by the writers over time that he/she becomes a one-dimensional character who is known solely for that distinctive trait. ↑

Chapter 6: Meme-orial Services

Never would I ever have guessed that memes would've become the richest social currency of our generation. I'm not even saying that for the hyperbolic effect.

Excluding the perfectly timed dad-joke, there is nothing quite like the feeling when a particular meme hits you just right. It's the perfect blend of succinct, relatable, and shareable comedy.

Virtually no one knows whence memes truly came, however.[1] One day they just showed up in some sort of big bang-like scenario—which is funny because the term 'meme' itself was actually coined by evolutionist Richard Dawkins, and that's also funny because some memes are so personally spot on that they can only be messages from god himself. (If I think about that too long I go cross-eyed, which isn't funny, but suffice it to say that understanding the true nature of memes is to understand the true nature of our universe.)

En masse, the collective manpower the human race puts into memes is nothing short of astonishing. If we invested *half* the amount of time we spend on memes into something more, let's say 'constructive,' we could solve the water crisis in Flint and probably everywhere else on the planet. We could undo climate change and finally save the whales. We could get rid of peanut allergies, or at least the poor and miserable people who have them. All of that being said, memes still take precedence because apparently the hunger for more memes is greater than the hunger of children in Africa.[2] The fact is, this is prime meme time and I think society is beginning to understand why.

Regardless of context, I'm sure you've heard the phrase, "What a time to be alive" at some point, right? Yeah, that's about memes. Think about it; in the

overall course of human history, we're obviously much too late to be exploring land on Earth because we've already found everything. At the same time, we're also way too early to be exploring the galaxy—like, *way* too early. We haven't even set foot on the moon in almost half a century. If that doesn't tell you it's been a long time, how about this: the last guy to do it was named *Eugene*. You don't know anyone under 60 years old named Eugene, and if you do, he's probably gone by his middle name since elementary school or something. So where does that leave us in the history of mankind? *That's right*, just in time for the golden age of memes.

Golden ages are a pretty big deal. I myself would probably be working in memes full-time if I felt like there were any clean money in it, but all those Instagram meme accounts have already succumbed to dirty tactics (such as pawning off other people's content as their own).[3] A couple of years ago, I personally almost lost my shit during my work for the Olympics when whoever the person who was running NBC's Twitter page at the time blatantly stole a composite image I created (with assets only my team had access to), just to crop out any trace it came from me when they reposted it the next day without giving me/us credit. (Relevant meme: "You made this? *I* made this.") I've also gotten wind that a few websites have straight up plagiarized some of my most recent work in Berlin verbatim, and that kinda makes me uncomfortable about the current climate of intellectual property altogether. (So like, it's not that I couldn't handle a full-time commitment of stealing and repurposing memes, it's just that I fear I'd lose my appetite for them this way—and I mean no offense to people who run accounts like Boywithnojob, but damn, even with a lifetime supply of watermarks, worrying about the performance of six meme accounts on a daily basis would make me feel like Boywithnolife.)

On the whole, despite how becoming a meme maker is not in the cards for me, I wouldn't hate the idea of becoming a meme historian, as long as it paid well. That said, in my first 100 days as an authority figure of meme-land, I'd immediately address the need for a better meme index. One major problem right now is that there's no efficient way to recall/find particular iterations of memes unless you know what each meme is called *and* you have a black belt in Google Fu to dig it back out of the algorithmic abyss. I believe the way to solve this

embarrassing crisis would be to combine a nifty text-from-image language processor with a comprehensive reverse image lookup service on the back end, and present it with a user-friendly interface that lets you input search terms and/or images to get some good ol' fashioned Boolean results on the front end.[4] It would be just like the early days of searching for available library books on a computer, but for memes. Can you imagine a Dewey Decimal System for memes? I hope you're as turned on as I am. (Relevant reaction GIF: the one from SNL where Bill Hader looks right at the camera and says, "Mark me down as scared and horny.")

Nothing I've seen has accomplished anything close to this, but as far as I know there haven't really been any attempts. (*Which is crazy, right? Because what could be more important than this?*) In the meantime, however, we all look like asshats whenever we're scouring our 30,000-item camera rolls in an attempt to locate the perfect meme for a given situation. "Oh god let me find it. You're gonna love it, it's so relevant. Wait, wait, I swear I'll find it, oh man, it's gotta be on my cloud somewhere, please, this will be worth it in the end, I promise. I'm telling you, it'll be worth it."

Newsflash: No it won't. Comedy is about timing and your meme isn't funny anymore, Brittany.

Anyway, for my second and far more important act as lord commander of the meme watch, I'd also install something to counteract the biggest threat to meme historians today, which (once again) is the fact that creative credit is loosely given, rarely valued, and poorly protected. Ask yourself this: why does every other facet of internet history, news, and academedia have us raving over citing sources and making attributions, yet memes get no such respect? Here's a hypothetical for you:

Go ahead and picture yourself as the first person to have Rickroll'd someone else. What an absolute legend you must be for conjuring up the masterstroke of

baiting and switching cybercitizens with a hyperlink that they *thought* would lead them to a site with breaking news or whatever, only for the link to redirect them to a music video of a skinny, red-haired, velvety-voiced, sunglasses-wearing, 21-year-old Rick Astley singing his timeless 80s hit, *Never Gonna Give You Up*. This is quite possibly the most preeminent internet gag of all time, and we'll *never* know who the genius behind it was because credit wasn't given where it was due. Nevertheless, the joke spread so far and wide and fast that in 2008, even YouTube pulled an April Fool's prank where every single link on the homepage was a Rickroll. We're talking about a meme that started over a decade ago (allegedly on 4chan of all places), and that sucker is *still* going. And even if you don't think Rickrolls have ever been funny or aren't funny anymore (which would be preposterous), you still have to respect the longevity. If there were a Hall of Fame for memes (which I would suggest calling the 'Meme-orial'), this would be on the very first-ballot.

I think there's eventually going to be something like that, if only for the purposes of digital archaeology. I mean, dank memes come and go at the speed of light, and the meme economy is so deeply entrenched in its own day-trading volatility that it cannot reasonably contribute to the documentation of meme history by itself.[5] There's a website called Knowyourmeme which is a commendable first step, but at this stage it's merely just a wiktionary or a glossary of memes that explains their origins, but doesn't account for their individual impacts on the grander scheme of memes in society. Nevertheless, I think this is only the beginning. We have a lot to look forward to, and it's going to be incredible when we look back on this golden era of memes. Remember when cable television was still a thing and VH1 had those "I love the 70s" (and 80s) shows? Imagine how legendary one of those would be if all it did was reminisce about meme history. I bet there'd be an entire episode dedicated to Shrek memes, and it'd be glorious.[6]

Viewership for meme-related meta content is already booming as well. Just look at Pewdiepie. That dude has the biggest YouTube following on the planet with 60 million subscribers (ATOW), and these days most *if not all* of his content is nothing more than well-edited videos of him reviewing mainstream memes or whatever else he asks his subscribers to submit (which usually ends up being

memes about how all his videos are about memes). I think this represents a very real shift in what social commentary is from an observational and comedic standpoint. If Jerry Seinfeld were still funny to the younger crowd (or if he were 30 years younger), that guy would've been pumping out memes like never before, since making jokes about relatable mundanities were that guy's $920-Million net worth wheelhouse.

Even *becoming* a meme is something that regular people and celebrities are often forced to embrace. (Because if they don't, netizens will just double down and meme them even harder.) From Hotline Bling GIFs to pretty much anything about having residual feelings after a breakup, it's clear that Drake is the people's choice target of memes (ATOW). Unfortunately for him, however, all of those memes usually poke fun at him for being sensitive, contrary to the tough guy rap persona he wants to put out—which only makes them funnier.[7]

You know, I get it though. Not everyone cares so much about memes. That's a concession I'm willing to make, but what I won't back down about is how much of an impact memes have on both mass communication on a big scale, and interpersonal communication on a small scale. Our daily interactions with people are arguably more online than off, and functional relationships these days usually require highly compatible text messaging habits in terms of frequency and expected availability.

On the topic of relationships, even modern courtship has undergone a digital transformation to the point where exchanging memes and GIFs and other digital content are literally ways to flirt now. That said, if there's ever a budding young couple that doesn't find the same memes funny or the same animals cute, they better find some common digital ground before it's too late.

Ultimately, I guess the point of all this was just to raise awareness about how much effort humans are truly putting into memes these days. Exaggerations aside, there's obviously so much else we could be doing with all of that time and

energy. (But hey, at least we have that Elongated Muskrat meme guy to pick up the slack by making super rockets, electric semi-trailers, and hyperloops, so at least the galactic needle is still somewhat moving.)

Umm… alright, I gotta wrap this up before all the memes I mentioned go stale, expire, or just aren't funny anymore. It's probably already too late for that—and I probably came across like the Steve Buscemi "fellow kid" meme here—but I really hope all of this meme-splaining hasn't left you disenchanted. If it has, don't worry, because all it takes is five minutes of scrolling down your feed to shock your tastebuds with another spicy meme that catches you off guard and hits you just right. But before you go and do that, I was hoping you could do something for me first:

Please go back and read the first letter of each paragraph and see what that spells out, because it was me all along. I was the first person to do it.

…

I Rickrolled you on a flight from NYC to Barcelona, 20 February 2018.

XXX

1. Or "*when'st've,*" if you're familiar with that particular meme. Also, fun fact: the word 'whence' already includes 'from' in its meaning, so for example, in the Lord of the Rings movie when Elrond says "It must be taken deep into Mordor, and cast back into the fiery chasm from whence it came," he's redundantly saying "*from from* where it came." The same goes for the word 'await.' (E.g., "awaiting for the bell" redundantly means "waiting *for for* the bell.") ↑

2. I know, some memes are too spicy. Keep your cool. Just hang on. ↑

3. Here's a sleazy trick you may not have considered: obviously one of the most frustrating things is receiving a meme in your DMs on Instagram that you can't see because it's from a private account, right? Yeah, the bigtime meme accounts will deliberately alternate between going public and private to exploit this frustration as a growth hack. If your friend sends you a meme from an account that is always public, then you can look at it, laugh, and respond to your friend without interacting with the account. If it's private, however, the only way you'll be able to see it is if you follow the account (or by shamelessly asking your friend to screenshot it and send it again). It's really just a shortcut of user behavior. In the long run, users are more likely to follow if it's a manufactured barrier to interact with their friends. It's also super transparent when accounts are working together because they'll take turns going public and cross-promoting another one that's private. ↑

4. Insert any of the "I have no idea what I'm doing" memes here, but preferably the golden retriever wearing safety goggles in a chemistry lab, or the Clefairy Pokémon sitting at the control center of what appears to be a nuclear reactor. ↑

5. Spongebob memes are still the most viable long-term play, of course. That's why they're the market leader on the meme stock market known as the Nasdanq or Nasdank. ↑

6. Shrek is not only a meme all-star ("*hey now*"), but it's also a solid example for illustrating the indexing problem. My favorite Shrek meme is the one where there's a text that says, "Hey, can I borrow your phone?" and the person responding says, "Just a sec," and then there's a screenshot from that

person's camera roll being ready to delete an entire album full of Shrek pictures before handing the phone over. Much funnier when you see it. Anyway, I once did a reverse-image search for this exact meme and the results came back with the 'best guess' of what search terms to implement for finding that image being: "worst part of a breakup." Fucking nowhere close. This is why we need something better. ↑

7. Before moving on from Drake, it's clear that all this attention favorably converts into people captioning his song lyrics, which to me is a bit upsetting because I think T-Pain lyrics deserve more spotlight. One of my all-time favorite Twitter screenshots (which I guess counts as a meme sometimes) is when someone took a tweet that said, "Sir Isaac Newton was only 23 when he discovered the law of gravity," and replied with "T-Pain was only 22 when he rhymed 'mansion' with Wisconsin." ↑

Chapter 7: Peevey Jeevy Philosopheevies

Okay, so there are these two movie characters in some suspenseful scene where they're trying to figure out a solution to the plot's big mystery conflict. The camera pans in with the most exquisite Ken Burns effect that you've ever seen, until one key object perfectly glistens in the frame and everyone in the audience notices it. The eyes of both characters lock onto the object at the same time. Next they turn and face each other slack-jawed.

Then one of them says it.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

Now, if this isn't just a false premise for the other person to say something stupid like, "Yeah, what time is lunch?" then this is a classic setup to advance the story by having these two characters save the day, right?

Yeah…I don't know if I buy it.

I mean, they're obviously going to save the day here, but my question is, is it really possible to think what someone else is thinking? In movies, sure, the scene direction often presents a linear chain of clues that's meant to deliberately lead the audience to the same conclusions, but in reaching those conclusions, are we actually thinking the same thoughts in our minds, or have we merely arrived at the same effective destination in regards to whatever is going to happen next?

What I'm trying to get at is the idea that maybe we're falsely equating our ability to reach the same basic conclusions with us actually being capable of thinking the same thoughts as anyone else. I mean, just because we've made the same deduction, does that mean our thoughts are necessarily and perfectly identical, or are we just assuming so? It usually works out just fine because there's never been a need for us to go beyond this assumption, and we're totally comfortable moving through life that way because close enough is good enough and the ends have always justified those means. It's simply never been an issue to figure out if the "I think the dog did it" that's inside your head is *exactly* the same as the "I think the dog did it" inside mine.

In a branch of philosophy called Philosophy of mind (related to ontology and metaphysics), there's a debate over something called the 'hard problem of consciousness,' which is basically an unsolvable mystery that asks why consciousness is a thing, and why consciousness is something that we can experience (and know that we're experiencing it) while we experience it. The part that makes it 'hard' is that it's not about whether experiences happen or "what experiences are like," it's about why it's possible for an experience to be "like something" in the first place. (Sorry for saying 'experience' so many times, but I kinda have to.)

So experience itself is something that only exists consciously, and it comes from our contact and interaction with physical states. What science does for us in this area is that it answers all of the so-called 'soft' problems of consciousness by telling us what is going on chemically and neurologically while we experience things, but it only manages to do so *after* accepting that consciousness is already a real thing—and it doesn't tell us *what* we're conscious of, or *why* there is a subjective aspect to *how* we experience consciousness as a phenomenon. This leaves us with a large degree of difficulty when we try to describe, for example, "what it's like" to see the color blue or "what it's like" to hear a specific musical note. Nevertheless, we *do* have those experiences because we *do* see the color blue and we *do* hear that note, which means that there's technically an answer of "what it's like" for us to see and to hear those things. More importantly, the way we feel about them or react to them is also unique to each individual person— and that's because of conscious experience (hard problem) and not because of

how our brains register that we're seeing a color or hearing a note (soft problem).

Having said all that, for any given thought we might have, the only way we can really explain it to others is through the use of whatever language we have at our disposal to convey it, right? And that's an outrageous limitation. Our thoughts as they relate to others, therefore, come down to the words we use—which is a glaringly thick reduction because the receiver of those words is really only making a best guess based on the hope that they have an equal understanding of those words. Even when you add body language to the equation, that's still quite a leap because words and gestures on the outside are surely gross oversimplifications of what the thoughts are on the inside. What we're left with is a game of telephone where one person is sitting there with Occam's Razor waiting to chop up an already abridged interpretation of the other person's thoughts and feelings.

Nevertheless, sometimes we still like to imagine or even assume that we know certain people so well that we're able to finish each other's ~~sandwiches~~ sentences (and other played-out jokes), but all we're really doing is predicting words because of things like personality, history, and familiarity, no? We don't *know* what they're thinking, we just know what they're *going to say* based on past data, and that's not very impressive. I mean, my phone's keyboard does that. Look, I'm typing all of this on my phone right now, and I'm gonna let it decide what I say next based on its predictive text.

I have to go but I can't get enough of that dog in the morning but can totally meet up if you're in Berlin.

That was nowhere near as funny as I hoped it would be, but I promised myself I wouldn't doctor the text even if it started embarrassing me with an endless loop of porn-related search queries or something ridiculous like that. I guess it wasn't challenging enough, so I'm gonna try again while giving it a saucy head start

with the word 'big' in hopes that we see some ass or some titties:

Big dogs and cats with a good woman, I think I can go to the prison haha.

Okay, there we go. It wasn't very coherent but still right on the money. Maybe I would've swapped the words 'big' and 'good,' but that's definitely what I was thinking.

In any case, even if we're able to finish each other's complex and spontaneous sentences, I don't know if that proves much about sharing the same thoughts anyway, because isn't the thought itself a lot more than just the words? And even if we ride that notion all the way down to the singular extreme of one-word thoughts (such as "No"), I don't know if one person's 'no' is necessarily the same as another person's 'no' in a given situation. (Side note: if you happen to be thinking about "no means no" as some kind of snide sexual assault joke here, that's 100 percent on you because I technically can't share those irresponsible thoughts with you anyway, you sick perv. Alternatively, if you weren't thinking about that until I brought it up, well then carry on.)

Now, at this stage, the plot gets a little lost because it's totally unfair to take the unchallengeable stance of how we 'just can't understand,' and I definitely did that. I probably should have opened with "Hey, consider the idea that no matter how simple a thought is, nobody can share the same identical thought because of individual history and first-person point of view technicalities," but sometimes it's hard to get there so quickly on the fly. (Get it? *Fly?* Because I'm on an airplane. Ok, sorry.)

The point is, our thoughts are jam packed with subconscious baggage and prior experience—and we usually don't know what random details lead us to reach certain thoughts ourselves, let alone those of others. And to be super wholesome

for a moment, I'd say it's those random things that make people interesting.

Case in point: pet peeves.

Pet peeves are probably the most interesting things that you can learn about someone else. It's as if our lives are gigantic math equations that have led each of us down a particular path to the point where something so specific (to us) can cause us to become so irritated and enraged that it's utterly absurd to everyone else—and pet peeves are almost always about the things that other humans do or say.

Sometimes I wish it were customary to divulge pet peeves when meeting new people.

"Hi, I'm Tom, and I get visibly riled up when someone refers to tissues as Kleenex."

"Hi Tom, I'm Annette, and I have to leave the room when I hear someone say the word 'chillax.'"

When it comes to our own personal pet peeves, the tough part is that we've probably suppressed them and don't want to think about them so much that it's hard to remember them on the spot. Normally they have to happen fairly recently for us to recognize and then say to ourselves, "Hey, I hate that thing with every fiber of my being." Like, if I were to ask you right now to rattle off your biggest pet peeve(s), it's probably catching you too off-guard for you to come up with anything really juicy. In truth, you're more likely to come up with some of the more relatable lame annoyances that don't really count as pet peeves in the first

place, so I'll go ahead and share a handful of those to show you what I mean and get them out of the way.

Drivers who don't use their turn signals. That's an easy one, though maybe that's not as bad as drivers in Florida who don't use lanes, their eyeglasses, or their medication.

People who prefer the toilet paper roll to flap from the back/bottom instead of over the top/front. (Those people are probably the same people who wipe back-to-front.)

When vegans who go out of their way to describe whatever they're doing as vegan. (I'm pretty sure even regular vegans get annoyed at these folks. "Oh sorry I was having vegan breakfast and then I had to stop back home to grab my vegan sunblock." It's like, yes, we know you're vegan and we know your breakfast was, too. Go take a vegan shower.)

The list goes on with things like slow walkers, cigarette butt on the ground throwers, open-mouthed gum chewers, conversation one-uppers, toothpaste cap non-replacers, texting drivers, and those who blame being highly organized on their fake case of undiagnosed OCD.

All of these are without a doubt unforgivable, but I don't know if anyone can go so far as to call them pet peeves because they're just too commonplace (i.e., there's a difference between being annoyed by what most of us would call awful behavior, and being annoyed by something that you have less than a rational explanation for why it's a big deal to you). So like, the plethora of common spelling and grammar mistakes such as you're vs your, or their vs there vs they're, etc… don't count as pet peeves per se, because they bother tons of people indiscriminately.

Instead, what I'm really interested in uncovering are the things that George Carlin called, "major psychotic hatreds" on an individual level.

I used to think that a pet peeve specific to me was when I would see people standing on those moving walkways (and blocking the path) in airports. Man, I could not contain my rage at that. "Look, you've just walked all the way to the start of this walkway perfectly fine, and now that you've made it, you're going to stop walking so that you can move slower than you were going before you got on it? This is literally a people moving device designed for you to speed up your travel time while on flat surfaces because airports are large. Otherwise it would've been called a 'moving standway,' you dingus. And look, the person that's not even on the walkway is passing you, how are you not figuring this out?"

Boy, I used to hate that. I still do, but I used to be really bothered by it. Then I tried to laugh at it, then I tried to ignore it, then I tried to stop acting superior, and then I just gave up because it'll never go away and realized it must be more common than I thought because the more I've been traveling, the more I see how ubiquitous it is. Anyway, it's something that I hate, sure, but it's not really a pet peeve unique to me.

Nevertheless, today I'm finally getting something useful out of it, because (after passing so many of them and being constantly reminded of pet peeves) I eventually started to ask people I met about *their* pet peeves during a lot of my recent travels. And I also wrote them down. It definitely took some time to weed through the ones that didn't really count, but by the end the payoff was great when the crazy specific ones started cropping up.

So here's a list of random pet peeves I got strangers to tell me (with my occasional commentary or further explanations mixed in):

When couples say the word 'babe' to each other in social situations where they should definitely be using each other's real names.

When products that have no business having limited editions have limited editions, such as limited edition bars of soap.

When someone mispronounces Reese's Pieces so that both words rhyme with 'feces.' (Lmao.)

When people say '*on* accident' instead of '*by* accident,' and when people say 'try *and*' instead of 'try *to*.'

When someone uses the eyeroll / looking up emoji. (Wow, this one must cut deep for that person.)

When your roommate uses the handles on kitchen cabinets and/or drawers as a place to hang dish towels.

When someone says that they're grossed out by the word 'moist.' (Okay, this was amazing, because it wasn't the very common one (that doesn't count) where people say that they're bothered by the word 'moist,' it was when someone *points ou*t that they are bothered by the word 'moist.'

Seeing someone squeeze mayonnaise on individual french fries.

When someone says "This is my favorite part" during a movie and thus ruins the chance of first-time viewers having a genuine surprise or whatever.

When the tag is sticking out of someone's T-shirt.

Any variation of when someone says "I haven't had my coffee yet" as an excuse for being crabby.

When someone doesn't know the words to a song they're singing and ends up singing a made up line about not knowing the words.

When somebody counts on their fingers to calculate time, like, "Okay, it's five o'clock now, so that's six, seven, eight o'clock when we get home."

When people call themselves digital nomads. ("Oh, you're a digital nomad, are you? That's so funny because I'm about to *gomad* from this stupid fucking conversation.")

When you ask someone a question but they answer a different one instead. (For example, if you ask, "Hey, what do you normally order from X restaurant," and someone responds with, "Well, are you hungry for Y or Z?" It's like, *dude,* just answer the question: What do you normally order? If I have follow up questions, I'll ask them.)

When the handle part of a spoon or a fork is too heavy to stay in a bowl on its

own.

When people say the word 'immediately' like "*ammediately*."

When waist-level kitchen drawers have their knobs at the exact height to get caught on your belt loops or pants pockets, and you get caught on one.

When people smile for photos by like, baring their teeth instead of smiling.

When scrambled eggs get the brown char thing from the pan (which is just overcooked egg) and it gets on the plate. (Very specific, right? This guy said he can't even eat around it. Poor guy.)

When someone you're talking to refers to family members without possessive pronouns (as if they're your family members as well), like, "Grandma is coming over," instead of "My grandma is coming over."

When adults refer to their stomachs as their 'tummies' or 'bellies.'

When people recite their phone numbers while saying the letter 'O' in place of the number zero.

When people eat ribs. (This one really caught my attention. Me: "What do you mean when somebody eats ribs?" Her: "I mean the act of putting ribs up to their mouth and chewing on them. Me: "And that makes you go berserk?" Her:

"Yes." Me: "Okay.") I learned later that this is a lesser-known condition called misophonia.

When someone uses their middle finger to navigate their phone. (This one sounds like a power move to me.)

When people say, "To be honest," so basically everything they said before can be regarded as potentially not honest. (This one is probably too commonplace to count as a pet peeve, to be honest.)

When people ask "what's your sign" and then immediately tell you to guess theirs.

When someone doesn't pronounce or write the 'd' in 'iced tea.'

When someone gets offered food by a friend, saying, "Try it, it's good," and then the person smells it before tasting it, possibly indicating they didn't fully trust the friend giving them food.

When someone eats cake with a spoon.

When someone says "resting bitch face" instead of "bitchy resting face," because not only does bitchy resting face sound better, it's actually the correct way to express that someone has a resting face that looks bitchy, rather than someone who has a permanently bitchy face that just so happens to be at rest. (Okay, so maybe this pet peeves was mine.)

…

I guess what makes these so interesting and/or funny to me (besides how so many of them are related to food) is that we don't know the experiences these people had to go through in order to reach those particular boiling points. But at the same time, we probably wouldn't even want to because we're all the main characters in our own lives and we have no way of experiencing someone else's experience anyway. What we *can* do instead, is be a physical thing that affects the conscious experience and/or actions of others, because to some degree we can even control them sometimes. Here's what I mean:

The next time you're in a long grocery store checkout line, slowly look behind you for a second and then wait a moment. Then at the instant of your choosing, just inch forward a little bit and watch everyone behind you follow your command. One by one, they will all inch forward. And you did that. (It's the same thing if you're stopped at a traffic light while driving and the driver in the car beside or behind you is texting. Before it turns green, go ahead and take your foot off the brake to do that initial forward lurch that everybody does when it actually does turn green, but then stop and watch as they do it too, only to look up from their phone and realize the light is still red.)

On a similar note, I'd like to ask you to do something special the next time a pet peeve of yours pops up in your everyday life: Try to notice it. Try to trace back your history of experiences surrounding this specific thing that makes your blood begin to boil, and hopefully this whole column comes to mind to cool it back down. If and when it hopefully does, I have just one more question that I hope you'll remember:

Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

…

I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Stockholm, 22 March 2018 and Stockholm to Berlin, 25 March 2018.

XXX

Chapter 8: Likes and Swipes

'Cause you only swipe right if you fuck for follows

Welcome to the days of the broke and shallow

Cautious Clay[1]

One of the things that comes with the territory of continuing to visit new, *umm*, territories, is that it provides a lot of opportunities to make your online presence and/or Instagram game look disproportionately dope. Of course, since I'm not above the urge to participate in all of that, I've understandably had a number of friends bring up the whole "Your life abroad looks so amazing" thing to me, and I can't help but think, *"No, my posturing on social media does."* This particular exchange has become somewhat of a pattern for me lately, and it always reminds me of another completely unrelated one:

Whenever someone tries to tell my family that none of my siblings and I look alike (which is true, we don't), they'll say, "But you all have the same smile." At this point, my brother will invariably jump in to say, "No we don't, we all *had* the same *orthodontist*." It's his favorite original line of all time (and to be fair, it is kind of a good one).

Anyway, the truth is, despite my quote-unquote "amazing" travel life, I could just as easily be in a deep, dark place mentally or emotionally or whatever, and still feel the need to conceal all of that whenever I post anything online. So could anybody else. And that's easily the most pernicious part of social media—because although we've established that it is *not* a place for sharing our psychological problems (yet), it's still somehow a place that people unwittingly go to in search of their psychological answers. (Or is it the other way around?) Still, even when people actually *do* speak out about these issues, are they truly

creating a place where folks could benefit from sharing their own struggles, or are they just being fashion forward nimbys? (It's like, "If you need help, ask for help, *just don't be jamming up myyyy timeline.*") Meanwhile, whenever there's hoopla in the news around social media and mental health, people act all unsurprised as if it were obvious, and that we totally saw it coming, and that we still did *nothing* about.

At its core, social media is a natural market answer to serve low-esteem vanity needs. Let's not pretend it isn't. (Unless you really believe that it isn't—and in that case, just pretend it is). It's the place to generate synthetic gratification in the form of likes, and the lengths at which we go to obtain them are oftentimes objectively ugly. The polished end results may not be, but it's pretty odious to see 8-year-olds taking countless photos of mom on mom's phone by mom's orders so mom can post one later, or when hot drinks go cold after the thirteenth Boomerang attempt, or when Apple pretends it invented Bokeh photography because there's boatloads of cash to be made with portrait mode.

So when it comes to everybody getting caught up subconsciously trying to show that their life is the next big thing going on in the world, Facebook-owned Instagram is an easy target for blame. People learn by using it that the more effort they put in, the more attention they can get out of it—which can go on and on until it becomes a person's main or only source of attention. And don't get me wrong, if this were only about attention, I'd be all over it because (apart from my oddly elite peripheral vision, as well as my uncanny ability to end up with my own row on an airplane) needing attention is my superpower. But it's not just that. There's also no compounding or lasting nature to this content and there's also no compounding or lasting nature to the gratification a person can get from this content either, so it's purely a breeding ground for addiction. What we're left with is a manufactured psychological need where people are driven to outdo themselves with their own content over and over again in order to feed the beast.

To keep up with that, it seems like we've taken exploitation to an entirely new

level. I mean, how else could you explain half of the things people hijack as excuses for new posts these days? For example, if you're anything like me (in the sense that you follow almost exclusively dog accounts on Instagram), then you're well aware of the blatant pandering surrounding whatever the hot new cause to support or topic of the day is. It's like, yeah, it's cool that your dog can use a smartphone or whatever, but what was he thinking with that 9/11 photo? "Umm, hey everyone, I see that you are never forgetting the victims of 9/11 today, but I'm a dog and I'm wearing a bandana that's red, white, and blue, so would you mind never forgetting me, too?" Yeah, your dog is an asshole.

We've very nearly jumped the shark on this whole thing as well, since the time has already come and gone when it was edgy to say you accidentally wished your mother a happy birthday in person instead of posting about it on a social media platform that she doesn't have. Now, due to how it's sort of rude to offer unsolicited negative feedback, the people who actually do post a ton of that *subjectively* pathetic content never really get any negative reinforcement other than the poor performances of their posts (aka not enough likes), and even then they may attribute that to things like mediocre captioning, not enough photoshopping, or just bad timing. All of this (probably) leads to the real danger, which is the vicious circle where good enough *never is,* and where each new post is merely a stopgap until the next one.

So real quick, if you've reached this far and are still thinking that the above was just a collection of extreme examples, and that this could never apply to *you* because all of this detriment only affects people who have a *real problem,* and that *your* online activity is totally and unequivocally healthy, do you *really* know that? Have you actually checked your screen time statistics to see just how much time you spend per day on certain apps? It's not a shameful question but it certainly *is* something we're not accustomed to asking ourselves—especially because our default setting is to think that if it's us doing it then it must be from a good place and not for attention or anything. But, can we really go on an exotic vacation or be dressed up at a fancy wedding and not feel utterly compelled to post about it? (Yet it's *other* people who are sucked into the attention economy, not us, remember?)

So at what point down the road do our values change and what might future generations think of our selfies? At what point do we look back on all this behavior and cringe? Personally, I don't know, but I've noticed that anytime we get close, it gets covered up by "Doing it for the 'Gram" jokes. At least we're somewhat self-aware, but there's also a lot of self-aware memes about Millennials and Generation Z having crippling anxiety and depression or whatever but who knows if that's even helping?

Back when the Internet altered the exchange of information forever, a natural market response was for amateur journalists to become a thing, and that sort of ushered in the great race for clicks. The news was once this amazing thing we invented, and it's a shame what we did to it. The same can be said for social media because it plays such a big role in daily life that the mental health concerns are totally real and justified, and the implications trickle into social development and interpersonal relationships without a doubt. Hell, half of the dates that young people go on these days are basically just going out to places and doing things while begrudgingly accepting to take photos for the other person's Instagram until they decide if they can or can't cross the line into being in the photos together. (And that may be a harsh way of looking at it, but is it wrong? I mean, conceptually that's not the point, but in practicality, is it not like that? Because I guarantee that at this very moment there's some poor bastard out there taking pics that'll be on some girl's dating profile next week.)

Look, at no point am I going to claim I'm not a part of it too, and I'm not just doing a hypocrisy nod here. (Lmao, wait, that's *exactly* what I'm doing.) Sure, I can pretend to see through it because I've been the guy behind a few social media accounts with millions of followers or whatever, and I've literally been paid by Snapchat to snap content for millions of views both on and off camera, but I'm just as guilty whether I'm on or off my high horse. Even right now as I spout off all of these animadversions (and other unnecessarily chosen words), I'm absolutely still going to be blasting out my own content and chronicling my travels on the 'Gram anyway. Of course, my excuses and justifications for this behavior include (A) I have a rule that I'm only allowed one post per trip, (B) it

helps me keep track of where I've been, and (C) I'm probably trying to flex on girls, and some of them think it's weird if you're *not* on social media. All of that said, you can rest assured knowing that I'm kinda disgusted with myself every time I make a post, and I kinda teem with self-loathing every time I add to my story. (I'm also bound to break the 'one post per trip' rule at some point because I know the temptation will eventually break me, so I'll go ahead and get another hypocrisy nod out of the way for whenever that happens.)

You know, I realize that all this has been super negative and not everyone uses Instagram or whatever, but social media as a category isn't something that was ever intrinsically designed to promote social well-being, even if we think it should be or ought to have been. The truth is, none of the platforms are totally innocent, and clearly the tropes about social media being inherently bad (and how people in emergencies make sure to record something for social media before calling for help) are tropes for a reason, and that reason is not so much 'because people suck' as it is 'because it's a business that takes advantage of how much people suck.' Again, it's just a natural market answer to an opportunity, and it runs on a 'shoot first, ask questions about societal impact later' model.

Instagram, for example, is going to keep serving it up because there's a billion monthly active users who keep eating it. The platform continues to implement new ways to create content within the app, and it makes its money by keeping people occupied on it. Instagram's ad revenue has doubled (or more) *every year* since at least 2015 and it's likely to approach 7 billion USD by the end of this year (ATOW)—and all of that cash relies on its users' sweet and juicy screen time. It doesn't even matter if you're primarily producing content or consuming it, if the app can keep you on it longer, that's a win they can convert to ad impressions. That's also why there's no lasting power to the gratification, since it's taken away just as fast as you can want more of it.

In fact, Instagram is so dialed-in on feeding you content it thinks you'll engage with based on your activity, that (at least right now) if you open the app and wait

five seconds, hard close and then reopen it, whatever the top post was five seconds ago that you didn't engage with will not only be replaced, but it's likely to be completely absent from your feed altogether. I may be stating the obvious here, but the point I want to emphasize is that this was an *active* choice to make the app load a freshly catered feed in hopes that you'd engage in a longer session and increase your screen time. Thus, you can kiss whatever post you saw for five seconds goodbye if you don't manage to remember the creator (because five seconds is simply too long for you to not have engaged with it according to the values of the platform).

But that's what it's all about, and I claim to know this because I've admittedly had many fortunate learning opportunities while running some of those big-ass accounts over the years, and one of the things that I probably could give an off-the-cuff Ted Talk on tomorrow is the mystical and elusive organic reach algorithm (formerly known as EdgeRank if we're just talking about Facebook's platform) that decides how and what content populates a user's personal feed. To sum it up instead, I'll just say that when Facebook decided to make the (somewhat morally objectionable) genius business decision to curb organic reach and tell businesses that they now had to pay for their posts to be shown to the same audiences that had already signed up (in a sense) to receive updates, it was (for lack of a better analogy) a gigantic kick in the dick to anyone trying to grow a business or brand online. It was also the catalyst leading towards a near homogeneous product behind the scenes of nearly all platforms of social media. [2]

Due to the fact that you (and your time and your activity) are ultimately the product for whichever networking app or platform you prefer to use, they all employ things like affinity scores, engagement levels, and/or advanced rating systems to dictate what content to tee up for you. (This is because user screen time is the paramount metric, which generally goes up with curated feeds versus unsorted and/or chronological, and it's also easier to sell ad space for an app when its users spend 10 minutes on it as opposed to 10 seconds.) The dating app Tinder and its Elo scoring system make a perfect example of one of the conceptually simpler rating systems. If you're familiar with the game of Chess, serious players have a rating that changes based on the outcome of a match

against a given opponent and his/her rating. Altogether it's a self-correcting system that relies on the players to ultimately perform at their presumed true skill level. In order to move up in the ranks, the system values defeating a higher rated player more than it values defeating a lower rated player. Tinder has a very similar and somewhat disconcerting Elo score for its users, where matching with 'higher' or 'lower' rated users will incrementally nestle them into their perceived desirability as human beings (*which I hope sounded as unconscionable as I intended it to*.) Thus, as these ratings solidify over time, the app will frontload a given user's feed of potential matches with a majority of profiles it considers to be in his/her league, with the occasional outliers on either end.

So of course that sounds pretty superficial in one sense, but in another it's realistically the only way an app like that can work with any efficiency. The simple truth is that some profiles *do* get swiped on more than others (and if you wanted to be wholesome you would have stopped the moment we arrived at an app designed for people to say yes or no to others based on their photos). At the end of the day, Tinder (or any related app for that matter) is a business that can only exist with an active user base, and giving its users a streamlined chance at maximizing their matches is a sensible retention tactic to minimize the amount of disgruntled users who may leave the app.

Now, since there's hardly any bones to pick about all of that, this would have been perfectly good and well if things stopped there. But remember, this is a business built upon the screen time of its users first, and a so-called dating service second. So, what's the main action or behavior that Tinder wants its users to perform from a business standpoint? I'll give you a hint: it sure as hell is *not* to connect with a match and leave the app. On the contrary, it's to stay on the app forever, swiping away until they get arthritis. (Maybe even carpal tunnel if they really lace into it.)

By design, the reward inside Tinder's user journey is and always will be the moment of making a match via swiping; nothing beyond it matters. Why do you think the chat function is still janky and terrible after however long it's been out?

Who do they think they are, Skype?

Side note: Remember when Skype came out 15 years ago and never got any better? Makes me think of those cups of Dippin' Dots ice cream that called itself the "Ice Cream of the Future" at amusement parks for the last 20 years. It's like, I hate to break it to you, Dippin' Dots, but it's already the future now and ice cream is not like you.

Anyway, the reason why Tinder doesn't improve its chat functionality is because it's just not a priority, and it's possibly counterproductive, even. Instead, the app celebrates the match in order to give its users the accompanying gratification, and then it leaves everything else alone so that the swiping will always be the easiest core user activity. When the user comes back to swipe for another satisfying match, that's the slippery slope that leads them down into the same dopamine feedback loop which got everyone in trouble on Instagram.

Tinder now makes somewhere around half a Billy USD of annual revenue (ATOW), and its profit margins are nearly half that to boot. Believe it or not, almost all of it comes from subscriptions to the paid version(s) of the app. That's crazy, but not so crazy when you frame it as people subscribing to the addictive gratification of new matches, especially when subscriptions promise a consistently greater number of matches (since more matches equals more times to feed the beast). It's not even a secret that the app withholds a portion of a user's potential matches behind a paywall because they're visible right there in the free version ensconced in gold. But it's not just that, because what makes matters worse for the user is that even the matches the app *intends* to dole out are released on a forced drip campaign. This means that out of all the profiles a given user could be shown upon opening the app, it will only show a small portion of the profiles that have already swiped yes on that given user per session, if it shows any at all. And when it does show them, they appear conveniently planted near the front of the feed. All this, of course, is meant to stretch the supply and improve the chances of granting a reward each time a user opens the app later on.

Tactics like these may sound trivial at best, but when it means a user might open the app a few more times per day and spend a bit more time on it overall, that's a win because it's time that could have been spent elsewhere—such as on a competing app. And keep in mind that Tinder actually considers Instagram (as opposed to another similar dating app) to be its strongest competitor due to how often users go to Instagram directly after or while using Tinder.

Of course, the drip tactics happen on Instagram as well, but it's not as obvious. Again, in an attempt to be able to provide rewards each time a user opens the app, Instagram holds back on showing the full amount of likes a recently published post has received all at once. Instead, it slowly dispenses them in small batches for a little while as a way to avoid exhausting the potential rewards as they come in. After all, Instagram is a business that focuses on screen time and activity more than it does on being a helpful photo sharing portal, just like Tinder is one that focuses on screen time and activity rather than being a successful dating service.

You know, hypothetically if Tinder ever went rogue and decided to make the ancillary things better, I guess the first thing to improve would be the chat. Actually no, it would be to remove the ability to forward someone's profile to a friend on seemingly any other app you have. (WTF even is that? I bet whatever madman uses that feature also uses the share button on porn videos.) Next, I imagine users would probably benefit from being able to sort or at least organize their matches by *literally any other method* than by the time of the last message sent/received. Maybe 'current city' would be good. And then there's also the whole notion of doing *literally anything creative* to incentivize users to engage with matches instead of just collecting them in silence like that weird ladybug kid from elementary school who got super into horses for some reason. And holy tits, I probably would have re-joined Tinder years ago if it allowed you to modify your search parameters to set multiple age ranges so you could deliberately avoid the 23-to-24 age segment known as the No Go Zone.

Tangent: the No Go Zone is something that is highly autobiographical and way more related to my life outside of Tinder, but it's a hard rule that I *never* followed and *always* got burned by, so it applies here as well. Anyway, yeah, the No Go Zone is made up of girls that are 23 and 24 years old. Just don't date them. Here's why: assuming you're within an acceptable age range to date anyone in their twenties, 21 and 22-year-olds are fine, they're great. These girls don't know what they want yet, and they also don't care. Life is good and nothing really matters all that much. Now, on the other side starting around 25, 26, and upwards, this is fairly safe as well. These girls have often figured out what they want, but they also don't care so much if they haven't figured it out yet, so they're comfortable not taking life too seriously despite having a clearer sense of their goals. Then there's the treacherous cocoon stage of 23 and 24. These girls don't know what they want, yet somehow they care. Meanwhile, they're also hitting the point where they're starting to receive the most attention they'll probably ever get, so that leaves them constantly confused and suddenly caught between coming to terms with reality and letting go of some noxious Disney fantasy or something. The worst is when they cross over from 22 to 23 because the venom gets you before you ever know you were bit. Oh, and I'm pretty sure nobody has ever lasted long enough to witness what happens to them in their return to light during the metamorphosis from 24 to 25, so it's best to wait a little bit just to be safe.

Umm, so anyway, I ended up deleting Tinder right after I reached a milestone number of matches that only served to point out the extent of my time wasting. That said, I still wouldn't feel right going scorched-Earth and completely bashing Tinder as a whole because (A) it's just an easy target since most people know of it, (B) there's bound to be updates and changes to make me sound outdated and wrong when they finally concede on some of the more obvious features anyway, (C) it's probably wrong to talk shit about a service while simultaneously demanding it—especially since I'm likely to ~~make yet another hypocrisy nod and~~ be back on it again eventually, (D) waaayyy back in 2013, Tinder's social media team sent me a goodie swag box filled with stickers, T-Shirts, and actual fire-lighting matches,[3] and (E) maybe the app itself is not entirely a bad thing in the first place. I mean, it certainly helped pioneer the rise in people's comfort levels ahead of encountering someone they met online. I guess that's a positive as long as you recognize that creeps will be creeps no matter what kind of app comes out (acknowledging that something like Tinder

didn't suddenly provide creeps with new opportunities to be creeps because they already were).

In general, I think the only lasting issues I have with dating apps end up having to do with me anyway, since they rarely do anything post-match for users, and I'm not willing to put in the extra work either. I'm just not going to out-effort all the other thirsty dudes on there, and I'd rather not weed through the girls who are only on there to boost their Instagram followings either.[4] Straight women on Tinder already get right-swiped by men upwards of 50 percent of the time (compared to ~15 percent the other way), so standing out to a girl who has a pile of instant matches waiting in her feed any time she opens the app sounds like too much work for me. I mean, what do you expect me to do, send a couple of messages and then sit around waiting for my turn like I'm Hillary Clinton? Lol, no thanks.

Anyhow, all this bitching and moaning calls for a mood shift.[5] Granted I've had my pitchfork out and come at these topics full tilt, they're still dangerous tools that we don't understand well enough. Even from the most perverse and the most beneficial perspectives, we can't say that they leave society definitively better or worse off because it's too complicated without foresight and hindsight. And look, while I claim to have some digital media chops, surely I'm no dating expert. I definitely give advice more than I follow it, and the only relationship I've ever had where both sides said the three magic words to each other was when we were too young to mean it, and not that I look back and think it was going anywhere because it totally wasn't, and this next piece of information is just for morbid emphasis—*like, really morbid, so forgive me and don't say I didn't warn you*—but I look back on it now and realize that she was the only person with whom I ever reached that point under any circumstances, and just a few months ago I heard that she died. (I hadn't spoken to her in well over five years though, so don't even try to feel bad for me instead of for her and her family.)

But the big, not-about-me picture here is that social development is changing on

the fly, without precedent, and way too fast for us to not be concerned as a group. We know that much. But what we also have to figure out is how to confront it individually (and only individually) since literally everyone's online experience is different due to everything being customized specifically for them. That's the first reason why Facebook gets called a reality distorting echo chamber, because people post with the underlying feeling that they're shouting off a mountaintop for all to hear, when in reality they're only reaching the select subgroup within their existing network that Facebook's algorithm decides would be interested in hearing it first. That means there's virtually no possible way for people to be informed in the same way using such a platform.

The problem is, digital nativity is still in its infancy, which means we're essentially guinea pigs without any kind of control group. Meanwhile, despite social media hardly being governed in the wake of technology outpacing it, we never really had a clue how social media ought to have been governed in the first place. All we did was create it as soon as we knew it was possible because it sounded good at the time. We're basically the test mice, and we still won't understand the long term effects until after we've actually reached the long term. Here's a related example:

This is the first time in history that pre-teen (or younger) boys started carrying smartphones in their pockets next to their balls for what may turn out to be the rest of their entire lives, and we don't know what that could do to their bodies over time because this is the inaugural run. Meanwhile, the effects of radiofrequency electromagnetic radiation (RF-EMR) on the *adult* male reproductive system are still under active investigation and debate. I feel like we're going to have to start looking out for things like that, because back when I was the age of these kids, the unprecedented technological change at the time was being able to go on a desktop computer (which tied up the family phone until we got a second line) and logging onto AOL to chat with classmates who were also sitting at their family's home computer doing the same thing. Damn, that shit was magical; it was desktop only, you could write melodramatic away messages aimed at unnamed people like passive-aggressive tweets, and you could fill your profiles to the brim with your favorite song lyrics.[6]

It's wild how AOL Instant Messenger was perhaps the thing that effectively kick-started the development of digital courtship, compared to the dating apps and shit we have today. I mean, for anyone my age, do you remember trying to nurture a budding romance on AIM by asking for someone's screen name and then adding it to your Buddy List? That was exhilarating because suddenly you had a passive way to see when he/she was online (so that was your window of opportunity to flirt). The gratification we got back then was suddenly hearing the custom music tone that meant your crush had just logged on. It's definitely not like that anymore. Also, do you remember how cute the movie You've Got Mail was? Shit, that direct, one-on-one communication setup was amazing. I can't believe we ever left that.

Still, maybe departing from that style in favor of the individual public broadcasts with private side chats we have today has a lot to do with how far off course we've gotten, and it's a shame that Instagram has taken so much control because the original one-to-one or one-to-many-in-private concept of Snapchat was kind of groundbreaking. I mean, before it came on the scene, our options for sharing cameraphone content were either standard picture/video messaging (which could be captured any time in the past before sending) or live video-chatting (which required both parties to be simultaneously available). Thus, when Snapchat came along, it presented this exciting new middle ground in which you could essentially send somebody content that's both guaranteed to be live-feeling *and* viewable on a delay. On top of that, the kicker was that this content also came with an added affirmation of two-way intimacy because the sender *had* to be thinking of the recipient in order to share the content in the first place (because the sender would not be able to share it again afterwards), and the recipient *wouldn't* be able to forward or view it again later either.

Of course, that was all before everything went to hell and Snapchat shot itself in the dick ~~pie~~ by coming out with its Stories feature. At that point, it became just like every other social media (where, instead of interacting with other people in a way that still feels personalized to us, we interact with ourselves and hope other people watch us do it). And so not only did that move take most of the intimacy

and personal touch away from users, but it also opened the door for Instagram to dominate the market simply by copying the feature, since self-posting for others to view was something *already* fundamental to Instagram, and it was doing so on an *already* established larger scale. That's digging your own grave if I've ever seen it. I mean, why would you switch to play a game where your opponent is clearly better than you? It's like, at least when MMA fighter Conor McGregor made an exact parallel type of decision (i.e., by changing from UFC to boxing rules in order to fight the undefeated and perhaps greatest pound-for-pound professional boxer of all time in Floyd Mayweather), McGregor was doing it for 100 million dollars. Snapchat did all that shit for free.

So anyway, the real shame here is not so much that we almost successfully had a way to return to a supposedly less detrimental form of digital interaction (for which Snapchat still deserves credit in getting close, btw). It's also not so much about how Instagram essentially did away with the personalized feeling of delayed live content by shoehorning the ability to add previously captured footage into that feature (which, admittedly, also sucks). But instead, the unfortunate aftermath here is that our existing problem became exacerbated as a result of it all. The whole 'everybody look at me' aspect of content being unhealthy for being about the sender instead of the recipients was a point we had already reached long ago. (And interestingly enough, while I was systematically deleting all my past activity off my Facebook account, I found a status of mine from May 11, 2010 that said, "What is this business about posting on your own wall?" It received no likes or comments.) The big difference now, however, is that social content suddenly started arriving even more ephemerally than before, since now it came with a limited edition shelf life of 24-hours. This means that the imaginary need to *produce* content got bigger while the window to *consume* content got smaller—thereby accelerating the dopamine response cycle and putting us on the fast-track to full-on digital addiction. It *also* means that the gap between who we really are (plus what we do with our time in real life) and who we *think* we need to be digitally is capable of widening (or narrowing, depending on how you look at it) on a *daily* basis.

Sure, maybe that's a little too intense. But maybe we've also never taken it seriously enough either. Nevertheless, with all the news stories coming out

regarding phone addiction, mental health, and the questionable influence of social media, people seem to have reached a consensus that maybe something is up. Many have even thrown their hands up and left Facebook altogether, so perhaps the market is starting to correct itself before the platform changes.

And for the majority of people who decide to stay out of convenience, maybe they can power through by remembering that these competitions for likes and attention are either (A) against our friends, or (B) against ourselves.

The solution here cannot reasonably be to close our eyes and stop our online activity altogether. Meanwhile, since the platforms aren't helping us with it, individually we've got to find a way to differentiate between when we're genuinely offering our time, money, and/or compassion to the issues and people we care about, and when we're just seeking approval. I mean, deep down we all just want to affirm that we're valuable to others and that we're worthy of being loved too, right? Deep down we just want the validation that what we're doing with our life is good enough for a right swipe. But we're not supposed to be people who guilt our friends and lovers into liking our shit, and we're not supposed to be people who hate ourselves, online or off.

You know, I don't usually set out to make morality claims or whatever because I like to think I'm able to avoid it, but here I am because I thought this one was a bigger deal than we first chalked it up to be—plus, there were actually some spots I thought I could provide legitimate value by sharing my self-proclaimed professional opinion in regards to the social media business. When it comes to the rest, all I can say is that although it's still way too easy to get lost in the sauce of phone and social media addiction, I think there remains a decent chance that future generations will have more important things to look back on than our stockpiles of selfies. Ultimately, all of this *could* turn into a mere blip on the radar, say, by taking responsibility and feeding the beast a healthier diet. If we can manage to do that, then maybe we can reach a point where it's okay every so often to go get high on a bit of bogus attention. And whether we ever reach that point or not, it may be best to go drop a few likes on my Instagram right now

just in case.

I might need it.

…

I wrote this on a flight from London to Austin, 5 April 2018.

XXX

1. I'm totally allowed to open with cheesy lyrics at least once—and these are a good fit for a number of reasons. You'll see what I mean later. ↑

2. Referring to pretty much everyone else's implementation of similar machine learning algorithms to phase out chronological feeds (despite user outrage which was promptly ignored), as well as how any new feature on any one platform is fair game for the rest to copy. ↑

3. I've been told I should never have revealed this to anyone but it was really great, to be honest. I still have the shirts. ↑

4. Nice growth hack, btw. Also, before I forget, here's one for Tinder that anyone can use: remember the thing about the Elo score? Yeah, you can reset that and start over from scratch by doing a hard delete of your profile. ↑

5. Random side note, but I feel like 'bitch and moan' ought to be a phrasal verb, so like, instead of 'bitching and moaning' it would be 'bitch-and-moaning' as a package deal. Just something to think about. ↑

6. See?!? Song lyrics! I opened this whole thing up with a snarky emo-kid away message. I told you it would all make sense. Also, RIP to Third Eye Blind and Red Hot Chili Peppers, the lyrical heroes of my profile as a kid. (They're still alive and all, but I'm just paying my respects now, before they die, instead of waiting until the day after and then posting about when I bought my very first CD to remind everyone that, although it wasn't me who died, I'm important too because they played a role in my life, so you should totally like my status.) ↑

Chapter 9: Expatty Cakes

One of the things that's always seemed weird to me is what it means to have a sense of belongingness. For starters, that's already a completely made up concept which only exists in our heads, but it's also something that we typically don't even observe (or feel) until we're removed from the things to which we belong.

Imagine you're a college student at a university: when you're on campus, you're just another student, so on top of wherever you're "from," you feel like you belong to whichever academic programs you're in, the activities you take part in, or the groups and clubs that you join. It's not until you're on your way home for a break (perhaps while wearing your school's colors) that you really notice the feeling of belonging to your particular university as a whole. Suddenly, the thing that made you the same as everyone else in one place is now what makes you stand out in another, and it's in that setting where belongingness exists. It's also where you better not do anything stupid to make your fellow peers look bad.

I was just on Stanford's campus a few days ago for the first time since I left (which is technically always the case, yes, but what's mildly significant here is that it was my first time back in the Bay Area in four years.) I remembered how bizarre it felt a year after graduating to be living right around the corner while also not really being a part of it anymore, despite going there all the time when I was the coach of the club baseball team.[1]

But regardless of whatever sense of belonging (and/or not belonging) I noticed back then, everything got taken up a notch when I moved abroad for the first time. I mean, one day I was sitting there with the other 320 million US nationals (without putting a single thought into it), and the next I had become one of the 9 million people who make up the American diaspora, which is a whopping 3

percent[2] of the continentals. Shortly thereafter, I immediately had to start answering people's questions about what country I was from (and what I was doing in Brazil) with enough regularity to make a person like me both not care at all, and also care a little bit more than they ever did before.

To me, considering how indifferent I was about actually leaving the US behind, I never really viewed myself to be especially patriotic or anything like that. Plus, for the longest time, I also never really put it together to think of myself as an expat—at least, not until I started noticing a few factoids that gave it away, such as the rather recent realization that my 'home' continent is the one in which I've spent the *third* most amount of time over the last five years.

In any case, I'm just now hitting the four-year mark as an expat (which I've learned is a word that's almost exclusively used by Americans and Brits because they're afraid of calling themselves immigrants), so I guess now is as good a time as any to try to piece together and share some of the most noteworthy observations I've gathered about that experience over the past ~1500 days.[3] As a fair warning, I'd also like to preface this by saying that it's a lot to cover, so it might not be totally coherent and/or chronological, but I'm taking a stab at it.

First of all, once I can get my mind to skip over all of the boneheaded and/or cringey things I've done under the safety net of being in a foreign land where the only evidence of my idiocy that ever made it back to the States was either temporarily visible on Snapchat or permanently entrusted to my brother and his fiancée in WhatsApp messages, I think my biggest takeaways so far have come from the things I've had to give up (such as belongingness—*and also my dignity, apparently*) in order to live abroad and travel so much. But seriously, we all make sacrifices one way or another, and mine just so happened to be a tradeoff where I was giving up the comfort, stability, and sense of having an actual home in exchange for an abundance of new opportunities and experiences (which I know a lot of people are forced to do for far worse reasons, so I'm definitely not complaining). Overall, I'd say that it's a pretty fair deal to take, as long as you're willing to bring the majority of your problems with you on tour *and* be ready for

some new and unusual ones.

Secondly, I never, ever want to be that guy who draws a gatekeeping line in the sand by saying you can't understand something until you've experienced it, but I will say that it's hard for me to feel like people who haven't played the role of a migrant can fully commiserate with the anxiety and headache of always having to be aware of what's inside your passport (and how long you're legally allowed to be somewhere). Admittedly yes, it's a privilege to take on that burden, but I bet all of your foreign friends in this position will tell you how distressing it is anyway—and I suppose if they're anything like me, they'll also tell you that it's worth it, despite having to jump through hoops and be haunted by the thought of losing their passport (in case they get stranded somewhere and/or have to go through all of that paperwork again). Case in point: I would rather lose my phone *and* my wallet *and* my keys than lose my passport right now. Not even a question.

So anyway, one of the things that's had a major impact on my experience abroad is the fact (or opinion) that I had vamoosed from the States at a time when the country was still being viewed with a mere ordinary level of scrutiny, only to watch from afar as it sort of devolved into the butt of the rest of the developed world's jokes. I mean, back when I had left, everything was still in seemingly decent shape on the whole; President Obama was chillin' after having just roasted everyone at the 100th White House Correspondents' Dinner, the state of global relations wasn't anything to be *immediately* fearful of crumbling, and despite some early plague-like signs of manufactured societal outrage and media frenzies over anything and everything that distracted us from a flurry of things with real consequences (like the police disproportionately killing and/or incarcerating black people), at least the dialogue for minority advocacy was otherwise gaining light in the country.

Yeah, so things definitely could have been worse at the time when I bounced; and while I'd never get all theatrical and pretend that the aftermath of the 2016 election would've made any legitimate difference for me had I been intending to

return to the States afterwards (because *come on*), I *was* happy to remain willfully uninformed of the sorry-ass political news cycle that was going on back then. Instead, I served my country by getting out of the way and putting on those funny little blinder flaps that horses wear when they're drawing carriages so they don't get distracted and cause traffic accidents.

Thus, it was a cruel misadventure to be under the impression that I was distancing myself from my country's soundbite politics when I moved abroad, only to be bushwhacked by the all of the hysteria when the guy with the combover crash landed into the ~~Orange House~~ White House. This, without a doubt, quickly led to my least favorite part about being an American abroad, which is always having to discuss US politics with people who obsess over it like it's the hottest new Netflix series. I also think it's been far worse for me in Europe than it ever was in Brazil, and that's probably due to a few logical explanations on top of my own warped observations. For starters, I had only just begun to plan my move from Brazil to Germany when the election was taking place, and I was actually visiting Iceland the day it all went down, so I never even saw what the reactions were like in Brazil. Next, since the hysteria was still waxing by the time I left for Europe, that probably made it a lot more noticeable and/or ill-timed because the new administration hadn't even completed its first 100 days by the time I showed up.

Another noteworthy factor to consider here is that Europeans may already have been more willing to engage with all the negative hullabaloo from the start due to the notion that they also have a much stronger inclination (as a group) to hold more contentious views of the United States—that is, according to the BBC World Service country rating polls in 2014 and 2017, which I'm about to try to present in a digestible way:

So in 2014, the BBC report showed that although the average *global* perception of America's influence was still slightly more favorable than unfavorable (42 percent positive to 38 percent negative), the average perception among the UK, France, Spain, and Germany was in fact more negative (46 percent) than positive

(41 percent). For additional reference, the 2014 report also stated that despite downward trends among most countries, respondents from Brazil rated America's influence much more positively (51 percent) than negatively (38 percent).

Of course, something ~~with small hands~~ big happened in 2016 which prompted roughly the entire world's opinions of the US to deteriorate significantly thereafter (at least in the polls), and the latest report in 2017 unsurprisingly revealed that the average country's positive perception (which had dropped from 42 percent to 34 percent) had been severely overtaken by the negative (which had risen from 38 percent to 49 percent). And as for the aforementioned group of European countries, their average positive views collectively dropped all the way down to 27 percent (from 41), while their average negative views spiked up to 57 percent (from 46).[4] Finally, and just for reference once again, despite how three-fourths of all countries in the 2017 report expressed overall negative leanings, Brazil held an evenly divided opinion and was the only country to return primarily neutral and/or undecided results.

Side note: I want to make it clear that I'm not trying to say that America deserves or doesn't deserve any of these sentiments—*yet*. (I've still got plenty of time to make myself look like an ass later on.) What I do want to say is that a large part of my experience and/or time abroad has involved literally "being reminded" that I'm an American even though I left the US because I wanted to experience something else. Nevertheless, I think I've learned a lot about it because of how pronounced it's gotten, so at the expense of sounding like an American who only wants to talk about America (*too late*), I wanted to share some of the understanding that I feel like I've gained.

So despite how these opinion polls may not really mean anything, I'm still trying to wrap my head around why the results seemed to be so consistent with my own firsthand observations abroad. I guess I began the whole process by spending a few years in a place where US favorability was already pretty high, and then I moved to a place where it was already pretty low. Next, since there was also the

somewhat unfortunate but impeccable timing that I was in the first location before the events of 2016 and in the second location immediately after, that probably explains why the differences felt so exaggerated. That said, it's probably also worth mentioning how living specifically in Germany now allows me to experience life in a country that typically scores in the top five best in the world on the UN's Human Development Index, and that also comes directly after living three years in a nation that's typically categorized as third world (or "developing" or whatever the gentle way to call it is), so I think all of that might play a role in terms of what I've been exposed to and which groups of people feel more qualified to make open criticisms around me. (Just think of it as a World Cup football match in which Brazil scores one goal and Germany scores seven.)[5]

So all of this unnecessary comprehensiveness over my ~~expat~~ immigrant life experiences in countries that are either in better shape or worse off could altogether only mean one possible thing for me coming from the States, which is that I know everything there is to know about this.[6] But looping back to my opening point, it's just weird how being someone from somewhere kind of only matters (or becomes the most noticeable) when you're someplace else, and the way things have evolved over the past couple of years has led me to believe that, right now, life as an American immigrant is probably not as fun as it used to be. I recognize that this may come across as Americentric[7] (as if I'm assuming that things ought to be fun and enjoyable for me just because I was arbitrarily born on some holy US soil or whatever), but in the same way that it's not required to be fun for me, it's also not required for anyone to serve as a pincushion for negativity. I mean, it just sucks to feel not very welcome no matter who you are and no matter what the circumstances may be, right? Of course, in no way do I presume that my own occasional sense of feeling slightly unwelcome in places is the same or worse than when people from other countries feel unwelcome due to the kinds of stereotypes that make others think they're inherently threatening and/or dangerous because of the way they dress or the color of their skin—and to that point, the fear mongering that goes on in the American news cycle would suggest that the US is among the guiltiest in that category.

And let me be clear about what I'm actually talking about here, because it's not

like I'm walking around being judged by the way I look or being harassed all of the time; I just mean that when I'm traveling around meeting new people and whatnot, I've been running into a shit ton of social situations (like at an airport, or at a bar, or at a ~~hotel~~ hostel lobby) where somebody starts mouthing off at me (and/or America in general) after discovering that I'm from the States, and that regularly puts me in the uncomfortable position where I either have to defend my country's honor (which I don't really care to do every single time) or defend myself from being stereotyped as some boorish, narcissistic American (which could very well be the case, but I'd much rather have them think that it's because of my personality and not simply because I'm American.)

So when you put it that way I suppose it does sound like I'm just snowflaking over my country being trash-talked when the truth is there are a lot of sourer things to experience in life, but humor me for the next bit because I've simply had to deal with it enough times that I also started noticing some things about it. Also, quick side note to my fellow Americans (whom until fairly recently I've considered to be my main, if not only audience):[8] my bad if I've been a poor representative or national ambassador, but I'm just trying to have a good time out here.

Okay, so what I wanted to bring up (and I don't know if this is only true in my own autobiographical experience or if there's any real substance to it) is that for some odd reason, the highest number of these unpleasant situations has happened to me when I was meeting people from the UK (or, as they insist I call it, 'the Yook').[9] And I guess that's not technically supposed to be surprising (since the latest country rating polls *did* say that the Brits were second overall in mainly negative views of the US at nearly two-thirds—which was also the UK's most unfavorable leaning in the report's entire history), but in my experiences all across Europe so far, it's just that a number of traveling Brits have also been the fastest to go there with me, as if revealing my US citizenship were the green light for them to immediately unleash whatever pent-up antipathy they had towards America. Of course, I can't really generalize their views as being misguided (or even different from the others in any particular way), but what I mean to say is that I've gotten the somehow palpable impression that they've simply been the most willing of all to say something to my face about it.

The thing about this that makes me wonder, is why I would end up with such a lopsided takeaway if this weren't at least a little bit true to some extent. (Because, assuming all things equal, why would I even notice it?) Meanwhile, I don't think I have enough information to evaluate whether or not it's just a cultural thing or even a sample size thing, but personally I've always assumed it was due to some re-imagined historic rivalry perpetuated by British media that makes some of them a lot more willing to go out of their way for it. (It could also just be the sheer accessibility and common ground with other native English speakers that makes those individuals more comfortable doing it.) All things considered, however, I'd be remiss if I didn't bring up the country rating polls again and point out that they're published almost every year by the BBC World Service—which is not only the world's largest international broadcaster, but it also happens to be obviously British. Thus, what's notable about that is the fact that in nearly *every* new edition, no matter which discoveries the report deems to be the most newsworthy that year, the first country-by-country results shown in the report are always the ones about the United States. (So like, on the one hand, this pleases Americentrics because the results on additional countries are either irrelevant to them or only valuable as a reference point for comparisons, and on the other hand, the BBC gets to offer its British audience the potentially juicy and negative results it apparently wanted to see first anyway.)

Alright, I realize I'm bringing up a lot of shit without providing clear examples but that's because the most prominent one in my head would put a former intern of mine on blast while he had no way of defending himself. That said, considering this particular former intern of mine studied at Oxford and was already the silver-spoony type anyway, I think he'd be alright if I went ahead with it all the same. (*Sorry kiddo, I owe you a pint or two if this ever gets back to you.*)

Okay, so, for whatever reason this young man loved taking potshots at US stereotypes whenever he could, even when they were a bit of a stretch. For example, if we were in a meeting and I complimented a colleague for raising a point that I hadn't considered, all of a sudden we'd hear a "*tssk tssk, close-*

minded Americans…" come squirting out of his mouth.

Now, first of all, to be fair, that *is* (and/or can be) pretty funny when it's a one-time thing, but the way those remarks piled up day after day made it clear that it wasn't just a joke to this young man. Secondly, what stood out about his constant zingers was not that they would feel personal to me or anything (since they were a dime a dozen), but that they were so voluntary and/or out of place that even when other people called him out for being a distraction, he'd double down and blame it on everyone else for "not understanding British humour" or something.[10]

Anyway, yeah, it's a bit baffling how much effort he was putting in for such diminishing returns. And don't get me wrong because I love the added attention from whatever makes a 20-year-old European think about American stereotypes in such high frequency, but I can't help but make a shitty reduction of it and conclude that it must be a reflection of the media that surrounded him growing up or something, because even when challenged with the inevitable, "Have you ever even *been* to the States?" question (which would hardly prove anything anyway), he also admitted to having spent slim-to-zero time in the US on top of it. That being the case, I guess I can't attribute all of his enmity to be his fault (since it must've been passed down to him from somewhere else), because he's still a super bright lad with many admirable traits otherwise,[11] and clearly I've been blitzing him while he's entirely unarmed (which I feel a little bad about as his senior), so I'll cut him some slack and say that maybe he'd have been more 'armed' if he were American…because *guns*.

Okay, getting back on track here, there's no way I could both complain about the States being a target of negativity *and* reasonably suggest that America deserves the preferential treatment it usually gets awarded. (I'd give it a try, but I guess the only way you can eat a cake and still have a cake is if you start with two cakes.) Either way, I'm still kinda new to this whole experience of being an American in post-2016 Europe, so you can't fault me for not anticipating something I never really personally encountered before. I mean, even if it had

been plainly noticeable at times in the past, it never felt like a recurring situation that I needed to make sense of, like, beyond just 'sticks and stones-ing' it.

For example, back in Brazil (which I guess is my main point of comparison now), there never seemed to be enough outside influence to take the spotlight away from whatever political drama was going on internally (no offense), so nobody ever seemed to care that I was an American (which I liked). In fact, the only external entanglements that resembled this kind of negativity to outsiders (that I remember) were things that felt superfluous and/or inconsequential, such as the football rivalry with Argentineans, as well as the rarely acknowledged *gringofobia*. For starters, political ties with Argentina may actually be at an all-time high right now (ATOW), and when it comes to gringos (aka anyone who isn't technically from Brazil), the xenophobia that I've mostly observed tends to be no more about *not being Brazilian* than it is about *having any specific potential negative influence whatsoever*, since it could practically be anything when literally any non-Brazilian is a gringo. (That's not to say it would be particularly better to have an assortment of prejudices for various nationalities anyway, but still, at least there'd be something concrete to alienate instead of one all-encompassing 'other' that serves no purpose at all. I never understood that one. And yes, of course, not everyone there uses 'gringo' as a negative term; in fact, most people will even bore you to death about how it's not supposed to be an offensive term at all. However, that being said, something I would bank on from my experience is that you'll never ever hear someone say "fucking foreigner" when given the opportunity to say "fucking "gringo" instead. Consider that food for thought.)

You know, looking back to the time before I ever stepped foot in Brazil, I think the closest I ever actually got to experiencing what it's like to be a US immigrant in Europe today were the times I spent with a surprisingly insular group of international friends during grad school in California. Sometimes, for example, we'd go for a ski weekend in Lake Tahoe or something and there'd be up to 25 of us in a single cabin, and on several occasions I was the only American in the entire group. In those circumstances, I somehow both belonged and simultaneously *didn't* belong in the slightest way whatsoever, and over the course of that year I also remember several of them taking what were essentially

huge metaphorical dumps on the US in our WhatsApp group chat, only to wind up thoroughly enjoying themselves and ultimately deciding to stay in the States post-graduation with no signs of leaving even today after five years.

So this was pretty confusing for me since it came at a time when I had only ever lived in the US, so my responses were all over the reactionary spectrum—from the redneck-ish, "Hey, if you don't like it you can *get out*," to the more disenfranchised, "Look, I hate America just as much as the next guy." (The former is definitely a line I borrowed from South Park, but the latter is something I must've said a few times on my own just because.) These days, however, while it's still hard at times to discern where I fall on that spectrum exactly (especially because I don't necessarily "feel" very American out here), I sure as hell have gained a lot of experience after a full year of feeling like there's been a tiny, negative target on my back.

I guess one of the things that's key to address here is the conflation of negative views of American *influence* and negative views of *Americans*.[12] That can get pretty complicated, especially because you can imagine how the first one is treated with a bit more objectivity than the second. Like, I think a lot of us would be more willing to tell people out loud that we think their country sucks than we would be to say that they individually suck as people. And I'm pretty sure I've already blurred those lines a couple of times here and there by assuming the correct one would be decently inferable anyway, but that's probably where the line gets drawn, right? For example, it's totally valid (and expected) to be malcontent with the States for blowing up every other country's news cycle *and sometimes their homes,* but that shouldn't lead people to pounce on somebody from the US any time they do anything that's loosely identifiable as being stereotypically American.

But back to my trusty reference point of Brazil; it was nice (for me when I lived there) to be an American in Rio because the two cultures were already heavily connected, for better or for worse. On the one hand, there's a massive degree of cultural imperialism coming from the US, which, when coupled with an

insurmountable difference in wealth,[13] leaves an impression that the positive characteristics of the US are something Brazilians ought to strive for. At the same time, Brazil is also so big and kindred that it can easily withstand all of that mediated influence and still maintain a remarkably strong and distinct culture of its own—which may or may not also be helped out by how low the country scores on the English Proficiency Index. (Hint: it's low). Combining all of those factors, Brazil doesn't seem to have much widespread concern over American influence because the cultures are already so blended while seeming distinct that everything (to me) just feels like the default, normal standard (once again, for better or for worse).

Nevertheless, while Brazil appears relatively neutral (in my experience) over the infusion of US culture, history suggests that most European countries have remained pretty much fundamentally opposed to it from the very beginning. This goes back before the events of 2016 were even imaginable, since long before anybody knew what "America" would ever become, there were efforts made in European media (often inspired by domestic business concerns) to curb emigration both by downplaying the inhabitability of the North American land itself, and by propagating claims that the land had harmful effects that caused the people who lived there to become quote-unquote "physically weaker" and "less refined." (*I guess that particular impression has clearly stuck around if they're still teaching it at Oxford*.)

Still, as media and technology advanced from the 18th century onward, so too did the way Europeans have traditionally gotten off on rejecting American culture, further leading historians, sociologists, political scientists, and philosophers to develop and debate the term 'Anti-Americanism' along the way.

Side note: if you're at all curious, there's some really interesting stuff on the Anti-Americanism entry on Wikipedia. And as luck would have it, that entry happens to include (ATOW) the thing that inspired me to learn more about all of this stuff in the first place—which you can bet your ass is those damn country rating polls I treated as capital T truths earlier. In my defense, however, there's

also a similar poll by Pew linked in there, and guess what, baby? All the data points between those polls line up.[14] (*And thank fuck for that, because I was afraid I'd have to start this whole thing over if it contradicted everything I've said so far*.)

Anyway, the important thing to note about Anti-Americanism is that it is not simply an "America is bad" thing, similar to how Americentrism is not simply an "America is good" thing. Instead, Anti-Americanism is an unyielding contrarian mindset that is based predominantly on clichés and stereotypes that refer back to the same predetermined negative conclusion (as opposed to having reached a conclusion through critical evaluation of comparative socio-political and economic values). Pulling straight from Wikipedia now and paraphrasing political scientist Josef Joffe (because he's from Germany and *hey*, I live there), the core aspects of Anti-Americanism are: reducing Americans to stereotypes, believing that the US has an irreparable evil nature and is conspiring for world domination, and the resulting belief that, because of these things, it is therefore best to cut off all ties with America in order to limit and avoid detrimental influence. Thus Anti-Americanism, ultimately, is not just a buzzword people use as an excuse to say that America is ~~great again~~ free of criticism; *that's* American Exceptionalism, which you'll find over in aisle 9 next to American Dreams.

But before I get to that one, here's a quick recap just for reference: Americentrism is a lopsided tendency which is mostly attributed to Americans and their views on the rest of the world, and Anti-Americanism is a rejection impulse which is mostly attributed to Europeans and their views on the US. (I would also add that holders of either two views can often be blissfully unaware of these predispositions, and if confronted, would probably deny that they hold any of these views in the first place.)

So now we've arrived at American Exceptionalism, which is an ideology loosely popularized by Joseph Stalin (as ridicule) entailing the notion that because of things like size, history, geography, and culture, the US political system is in such a unique situation that it cannot be compared with other democracies

throughout the world. Overall it's a pretty basic apples-to-oranges assertion that we shouldn't examine the status quo of the American government under the lens of European experience (and vice versa) because they're "just too different" or something equally weak and totally bullshit-sounding.

But like it or not, that's usually the stance that gets reflected by the news media and/or history books because it's just such an easy way to portray reality. I mean, the mere size of the US is already enough to treat that bitch like a special case because Europe is only 3 percent bigger in land mass after you include Iceland. And not that Iceland shouldn't count or anything, but when you consider just the OG countries in Western Europe that made up the EU-15 in 1995 (such as Germany, Spain, UK, Italy, Sweden, France, etc), the US is nearly 3 times the size of that group.

Nevertheless, even if you agree that it's totally valid to be making apples-to-apples comparisons of the US to other democracies, there's still no denying that it's a weird case for a number of reasons today (including if it's its own fault): one, it's the size of the entire continent of individual countries that it usually gets compared with; two, it has 320 million people running around in a rat race above the poverty line (with only 1 in 5 being able to afford any form of available healthcare or education out of pocket); and three, it's governed by a system that was not only intended for 2.5 million people at the time of the original 13 colonies but has also barely been updated ever since due to an overemphasis on clinging to it—and meanwhile everybody freaks out any time someone powerful breaks one of those rules because we can't manage to enforce them well enough to punish those people despite everyone's valiant attempts to do so on Twitter. (*Yeah, oof.*)

Now, if we're considering "Anti-Americanism" to be an incidental misnomer, "American Exceptionalism" feels almost *intentionally* misleading. It's like, even if America *were* a special case, referring to it as 'exceptional' would still be a terrible idea because the modern connotation (aka associated meaning) of that word evokes excellence while the denotation (aka actual meaning) is that it's

simply atypical or an 'exception' to a certain rule. I really want to say that this was all Alexis de Tocqueville's fault for the language he used in his famed *Democracy in America* (i.e., "The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one,") but that's only with the hindsight knowledge that self-importance in fact became a US stereotype *and* how the word 'exceptional' evolved semantically over time. Either way, that's the origin story for the concept back in the 1830s, even though Stalin often gets credit for having been the first to say the words "American Exceptionalism" together as a single term closer to 1930.

In any case, it's just really stupid to take a pretty clear concept and attach it to such an ambiguous word, especially in the *exceptional* case of America having one elected person that the rest of the world misconstrues as representing the other 320 million, and by the way, this one person has also *already* publicly misinterpreted this exact terminology by calling it, quote, "Insulting to the world," because, "If you're German, or you're from Japan, or you're from China, you don't want to have people saying that."

Nevertheless, even if we're conceding that the word 'exceptional' simply means something different now than what it used to mean, that's fine—but we could still update the term to "American Irregularity" or something (which also sounds like shit, but whatever, just don't pick a word like *phenomenal* or *extraordinary* or *remarkable* or *fortuitous* or any other word that we colloquially use to describe something as being good but doesn't technically mean good or bad by definition).

So when we argue about things like American Exceptionalism, I guess what we're really doing is just squabbling over made up concepts and words, since they're all based on loose interpretations without any clear definitions anymore (because even the clear ones change over time). There's always going to be a flipside to every coin here, and proponents on either end can keep debating back and forth by claiming theirs is the truth. I think the funniest example of this is

the fact that Wikipedia has been criticized for having Americentric biases because of its greater affinity with US English sources and spellings. (So like, even a lot of what I've presented here today could therefore be subject to a downwardly spiraling spat of, "Oh, you make some good points but they're all based on support that's partial to the US," and "Yeah, but that's just impression-based conjecture to discredit the parts you disagree with," and "Okay, but you can't know that for sure," and "Well, you can't know the first thing you said for sure either," and so forth.) Ultimately, it's a never-ending tug-of-war that might sound all too familiar. *"These are your facts, huh? Well, you better check where you got 'em because those are fake facts."* (I swear I've heard that somewhere.)

Okay, I think I've made it clear that none of this psychobabble ever seems to make much of a difference anyway, so I think we should finally get back to what really matters, which is the fact that I'm annoyed by being pressured into discussing American politics and then feeling compelled to defend the US as if it were my job to listen to a bunch of strangers' pent-up criticisms and then respond with some kind of rationale to satisfy them. I recognize that I might be doing the exact same thing right now, but I also think I've done a decent enough job of staying even-keeled up until this point, so if you'll indulge me for a bit, I'd like to have some fun by making an ~~American~~ ass of myself and letting out some of my frustration. And although it may look like I'm gonna be playing some kind of 'poor me' victim card, I'll go ahead and squash that right away by closing my eyes and saying, no, it's not poor me because, for all intents and purposes, I still lucked into being an American. (*Good start, am I right? What an absolute ass.*)

Side note: I honestly had a hard time just writing that, but whatever, this might be fun.

The truth is, I didn't sign up for any of this shit when I moved to Europe, but because I put myself out there by traveling alone so much, I often end up as the lonely duck on the pond taking all the hits. I guess it's just a super annoying price to pay in order to use my US passport, which is exactly why I carry the

Team Canada backpack that I was conveniently gifted during the Olympics wherever I go. (That way I can hopefully avoid the "Oh hey you're speaking American-sounding English so you must be from the US, let's talk about Trump," by spinning around to reveal a gigantic maple leaf on my bag and hit 'em with a "Sorry I'm from Alberta, Canada. Would you like to talk about Tim Hortons coffee instead?")

Unfortunately, I don't always have that bag on me, and that's when I have to be prepared to defend the US with canned responses for people from basically every other country as if they're each somehow special enough for me to go back to the States and tell everyone how we should really consider caring about them.[15] On the one hand, if I'm caught off-guard and end up saying something that's not well-disposed, congenial (like the previous sentence), and/or completely bulletproof, then it's immediately subject to being cast off as ignorant, arrogant, or whatever else—and there's no chance of having a good time, let alone a discussion where both sides are listening. On the other hand, I could also say nothing and let the conversation erode into someone lambasting my country for what feels like no reason since we're oceans away and we just *had* to reach the "What country are you from?" question, which is also no fun. It's like, "Look, Jonas from Sweden two weeks ago, I'm sorry I didn't know that Obama's 2013 trip was the first time a sitting US president visited Stockholm. I'll try *hardlier* next time."

So I think it's clear by now that it's usually a lose-lose just for me to engage in those conversations, but while I'm already digging myself into a hole, I might as well keep going. Just try to keep in mind that I may be blurting out some hot takes that don't even reflect my own beliefs (aka retweets are not endorsements) because they still make for some killer TV.

You're watching The Great American Soap Opera, only on Netflix.

One of the recurring elements of these situations/conversations is the obvious

follow-up to the "Where are you from" question, which is the "Which state are you from" question; after answering this one so many times, sometimes you just want to be sarcastic when you see the judgment start to leak out of someone's face (because you just know they're already sitting on something edgy to say regardless of your answer). That, coupled with the fact that it's been a decade since I last spent any significant time in the state(s) where I grew up (so I don't even know what it's like there anymore), makes me want to tell judgy Jonas over here to *just pick one* because there's 50 of them and his guess is as good as mine. "It's a shame you don't have anything specific to say about my state, but I'll get right on that letter to the mayor of New York City about how there's too much litter there for your liking, pal."

(Look, I'm gonna break my ass-character for a moment, but honestly, sometimes it just takes a while to get used to something that's bothersome even if you see it coming. That's why when I first started repeating the same rodeo over and over with new people, it wasn't always easy to twiddle my thumbs and keep totally quiet in the face of unsolicited diatribes. I don't think you've had to have traveled much to know that America gets mocked and that those monotonous conversations can be tiresome. Still, that won't stop me from traveling and meeting new people because those experiences are usually awesome seven or eight times out of ten. Of course, that's still a poor excuse for me to have been rude at times, and I'm sure I wouldn't be proud seeing any replays, but I'm happy to have gotten the experience because I definitely don't have it all figured out yet anyway.)

Okay, here's something else that I want to be obnoxious about: when people try to talk about Americans as if they/we can all be lumped together into one big homogeneous category (as if Americans from, say, Mississippi were anything like Americans from, say, Washington state). Apart from some interpersonal examples, I also recall once seeing a frozen pizza box in a store that was labeled *American* in the same way they'd be labeled *Pepperoni*, except this "American" pizza was topped with cheese, onions, and olives, which is a combination I'd *never* seen marketed in America in my entire life. There's also this condiment called *American Sandwich Sauce*, which I know absolutely nothing about despite having seen it in several European countries. To me, it only makes sense

to have that kind of stuff when a country is small enough to have its own quintessential flavor or something. (*Unless that sauce is diabetes flavored.*) I mean, hell, surely Hawaiians must feel like there's sand in their buns every time someone brings up ham and pineapple—but at least it's logical to give Hawaii its own thing considering it's a small remote chain of exotic islands that, when put together in size, still don't make up a third of one percent of the other 49 states.

Let's also not pretend that the US doesn't have very distinct regions in the first place. According to this book I read (called *American Nations*) on the cultural and political differences behind the formation of the 50 states, the US is basically made up of 11 distinct territories that could all be separate countries, and I bet hardly anyone would bat an eye if they were. Even in my own family, my two siblings and I have each lived in two unique regions that no other family member has. We're a really spread out family, and we've still only lived in seven regions among the five of us. (So when it comes to flavors and whatnot being labeled *American,* aren't those generalizations a bit presumptuous? Like, isn't that what Americans get relentlessly accused of doing themselves?)

On that note, here's another spicy hot take: Americans not giving a damn about stuff going on overseas is not always an indication of ignorance. This one is going to take a while to get through, but it usually starts with someone pointing out that European countries play almost no part in daily American life, and they might also say that the reverse isn't so true either. There's a pretty good illustration of this in an episode of King of the Hill, where some guy says "You Americans, you're so gosh-darn ignorant and self-centered. Tell me who our prime minister is," and Hank just answers, "*Why*?"

A similar, non-threatening analogy to this is how most ordinary people in the northern hemisphere (not just Americans) have just about zero reason to know or care that the northern and southern hemispheres shift their daylight savings times in opposite directions. Sure, it's logical enough if you ever bothered to think about it, but there's also more to it, because many countries make their switch on

different dates, and that causes a few weeks of complicated scheduling for international business. (My point is, although that's a neat thing to know, why the hell would most northern-hemisphere dwellers ever give a shit if they never spend time in or do business with the southern hemisphere?)

At the end of the day, it's not that the names of foreign prime ministers aren't important enough to consider, but damn, Americans already have enough to keep track of inside their own raging dumpster fire that is the United States. I can even escalate this particular take further by mentioning that the US spends most of its media efforts covering *itself*, and it *still* doesn't do a good job, so it's not America's fault that European media does the same thing half the time. *I mean, have you tried not covering the US for once? Oh, you haven't, because we can't be trusted, since our military might nuke your country's face off, so you need to keep a watchful eye? Yeah, well, maybe that's a good reason to just be nicer to us, lol.*

Here's another obnoxious take to consider: the United States is one of the rare countries (if not the only one) where there is *such* a high level of domestic self-sufficiency that its people can go their whole lives without ever needing to know a single thing about another country (let alone another state), apart from knowing that they probably trade goods and/or resources with them—and this *can be* interpreted as a good thing.

137,588,631.

That's the number posted by the US Department of State in 2018 for valid passports in circulation. This means the amount of Americans that *have* passports, let alone *use* them, is only 43 percent.[16] It is nothing short of an insane accomplishment to reach the point as a nation where you can provide your citizens with the possibility of not having to bother with the rest of the world. It's *absolutely* narrow-minded as well, yes with a capital Y, but this is an (unfortunately very aptly named) 'ignorance is bliss' kind of deal that a shit ton

of people are fully comfortable taking.

Here's my actual point: Americans aren't dumb because of not caring to know about other shit, we're dumb because we have shitty public education at the same time that we almost never benefit from caring about that stuff. Dumb people don't stop being dumb without better education, and they also don't stop pumping babies out just to go dumping them back into the same system. Sure we gloss over a few details here and there, but this goes both ways since there are dumb people all over pockets of Europe (and the rest of the world) too—and it's absurd to think otherwise. The difference is that those people aren't on television or in YouTube videos being baited into looking foolish. (It's like, well done, Jimmy Kimmel, you've proven that if you interview 100 people on the street you can find 5 that will say something dumb on camera.)

I mean, shit, I've run into nearly literal hordes of Europeans who said they can't believe a majority of Americans voted for Trump.

Majority? *Psshh, please.*

I'm usually ready to clap back on this one, starting off by getting them to agree that this means roughly one out of every two people on the street would presumably say they voted for him—because that's the goofiest and grossest oversimplification of our goofily and grossly over-complicated system. The fact is, it's only one in five, and here's why: working backwards, Trump received fewer votes than Clinton nationwide, so first of all, there goes the majority claim already. (Of the 138,846,571 votes cast, he got 62,980,160 to her 65,845,063.) The next thing to consider is that his 45 percent share of the vote was also only composed of people who showed up to cast a vote (which is also true for Clinton). Thus, if we're talking about people who are *eligible* to vote in America (which is somewhere between 230-250 million), that takes us down to about 25 percent of Americans who voted for Trump. Finally, if we include the remaining population that's ineligible to vote due to immigration, nationality, incarceration,

and age-related reasons, we're back up to the full 320 million, dropping it all the way to 19.7 percent.[17]

The big story here (besides my loaded arithmetic) is not that millions of Americans voted for Trump, it's that millions of Americans don't participate in and/or support their own broken system, which allows less than 20 percent of the population to decide its president. But how could they? For no other reason than "Because it's important?" *Important*? Bitch, flossing is important too, and yet the night before you have a dentist appointment, your gums are bloodier than the Red Wedding in Game of Thrones. Are you seriously trying to fool an oral hygiene professional with one last-minute night of flossing?

Side note: if I'm coming across as somehow defending the US by giving an excuse or explanation as to why all this happened, please disregard that mistake. The US deserves nearly all the criticism it gets for this, as well as the criticism it gets for many other things. Nevertheless, the US is still a fantastic country *for people who make a lot of money*; but it's also a place where you have to spend money to make money, so if your starting position is poor, there's a very high likelihood that it stays that way because being poor is expensive. A common tax-of-poverty example is how a person who, right now, can only afford to buy the $20 pair of boots that last six months instead of the $100 pair that lasts five years ends up paying twice as much over a five-year span. (This is also called the Boots theory of socioeconomic unfairness, first popularized by Terry Pratchett.) The exceptions to that rule are the rags-to-riches stories that make headlines and serve not only to keep hope alive for the have-nots, but also to desensitize the haves from the reality of that plight which makes the US one of the toughest leading countries in which to be poor.

As many as 47 percent of Americans say their savings can't cover their costs for the next 90 days. One in five Americans has to throw away the prescriptions written by their doctors because they can't afford to fill them. More than half of Americans would be bankrupted by one single large, unexpected medical bill. Hell, even when I have medical issues coming up abroad (where my German

taxes provide me with virtually unlimited healthcare at no additional cost), I often find myself trying to shake them off and ignore them anyway due to a residual habit of avoiding seeing doctors. Shit, just setting up appointments is still unnerving to me because I'm so used to thinking it'll be an expensive hassle.

I think the biggest thing people have trouble recognizing is the collective set of attitudes surrounding all of those issues. I mean, isn't it absurd how we've reached the point where people quietly frown upon those who attempt to crowdfund their medical bills as if it were a trashy or shameful thing to do? Like, "Ooh, I ain't clicking on that link," as if not being able to pay exorbitant medical bills is what these people deserve for not doing better in American society. And since resorting to that wasn't bad enough, let's throw in a side of disdain from their peers.

I'm not suggesting other Americans should be paying for those people while the current system is what it is. If anything, holding tightly onto their own money takes precedence when the nation's greedy approach to healthcare leaves them on our own no matter what might happen. I guess it makes sense, then, that the US government offers (almost exclusively to people under 30) health insurance policies that are literally called "catastrophic plans," with which you try your best to avoid any and all treatment (paid out of pocket) and only pay the monthly premium (effectively for nothing), so that if disaster strikes you can (after paying your full deductible) be fully covered (but only in theory because it actually depends what happens to you). The sheer *existence* of these inherently American things might help foreigners understand the problem of single-issue political voters supporting whichever candidate helps their pocketbooks, since being capable of maintaining one's own livelihood has utmost importance in a country where the plot of Breaking Bad is a more believable reality than getting affordable cancer treatment.

Believe whatever you want to believe, but having been very happy with the accessibility and quality of care in the German universal healthcare system

(where all I have to do is swipe my health card at the hospital and I pay nothing), I personally have to take the stance that it's better for me to over-contribute for my share and merely hope that nothing happens to me than to be completely responsible for myself and pray to god, Tim Tebow, and the entire Mormon Tabernacle Choir that nothing ever does. I think it's also helpful to consider the following somewhat arrogant approach: I'm just plain better off than most people, so if I don't help out people who are worse off, then I'm neither generous nor humble. Thus, that should make me okay with lending a hand to people who suck, because people who suck often end up needing serious healthcare. What I'm not okay with is the idea that if I weren't better off (aka *if I sucked*), then I'd be in big trouble just like them if anything were to happen to me.

For me in Germany, it's so nice to know that I can get whatever I need due to my contributions just like everybody else, because the truth is, *not needing healthcare is always better than needing healthcare.* At the same time, I shouldn't expect people who need serious healthcare to carry the burden of paying alone because they're already super busy needing healthcare. That's why it's just such a dick move when people take a stance like, "Well hey, I can afford to take care of myself in this dog-eat-dog world, so the rest of you can fuck off." Just be happy that you're either lucky enough to afford expensive healthcare, or lucky enough to not require it; there's no reason you should be greedy beyond that because this is an issue that over 30 developed nations have literally proven that we can eliminate, yet for reasons like "America is super duper special" there's a "conventional wisdom" that it can't be done in the States. At the end of the day, it comes down to a fundamental difference between the mindsets of "Hey, let's try our best to eradicate as many preventable hardships as possible for everybody" and "Lol fuck that shit, it's every man for himself."

Alright, I know it's not a good practice to lay out criticisms without offering solutions, so as a once-and-for-all 'I'm done with politics after this' thing, here are my suggestions that are easier said than done but still entirely doable:

Our nation's health should be determined by people, not by money. Install universal healthcare and remove the middle man that is currently required to make a profit and pass it back to the people who need it. Make ambulances something people can be comfortable calling instead of begging bystanders not to call them out of fear of the associated costs. Citizens should be able to take care of their health when they need to, not when their bank accounts allow it. I'm straight up boycotting the US health system until we get it right, because based on what's available to me, not having health insurance in the US is the same thing as having it. I just can't reconcile with how much of a no-pun-intended-whatsoever 'foreign concept' it is that I pay my German taxes and am awarded full coverage across Europe with no additional cost to me (and when you quit your job you can voluntarily pay an affordable monthly rate to maintain the same coverage). Meanwhile, I also have to file my taxes in the US (required for US citizens who live abroad as well, though excludable up to a certain amount) and then I either have to opt out for no healthcare coverage (that I may pay a penalty for), or opt in for minimal coverage that gives me jack shit and two doctor visits at an additional cost to me in the thousands per year. No thank you.

Our nation's education should be determined by people, not by money. Make higher education available to everyone at no primary cost, and if people want to shell out for private universities, that's great too (because the US undoubtedly has some of the best in the world and the preservation of competition among them is still a good thing for pushing innovation forward at a high velocity). We should not be applauding feel-good stories of children raising money in the hopes of one day being able to pay for a college education, and we should not have a crabs-in-a-bucket mentality as if education-for-all is a bad thing just because we weren't given that option for ourselves or for our children. Going to college and coming out drowning in financial debt is not the way people should have to live.

Our nation's politics should be determined by people, not by money. I like the popular idea of forcing candidates to wear sponsorship stickers like NASCAR if they want to accept big corporate and/or private campaign donations. While we're at it, let's also change the electoral system where currently if you want your vote to matter, it unfortunately has to make a difference in your tiny county

first, which then has to make a difference in your state (which is already prorated and still subject to a do-over if it's too close and not what the most powerful people want, and then finally it has to make a difference on the national scale), which is also based on however many votes your state is worth. (I'm looking at you, Florida.) Yeah, let's go ahead and make all votes actually matter for once instead of just in slogan form. That might even help voter turnout too, which hasn't hit 60 percent in 50 years, and eligible non-voters were in the ballpark of being two times the number of votes counted for either candidate in 2016.

I already said I wouldn't gatekeep and pretend that I know better (because if anything I know less because I keep my distance), but… having seen and lived in places that get a lot of those things right, I can't help but think the US is doing a poor job on the number one thing that the country quote-unquote "stands" for (which is supposed to be that every person is equal). I also believe it's not too late, and that America is not too big to make scary changes even though we get caught up thinking change can only be incremental. So why not just start with those and see how we do?

At the end of the day, while America is no longer among the greatest countries on the Human Development Index, it's still pretty clearly *numero uno* in the world power rankings—and the rest of the world is most likely keeping a close watch on US news in fear that a couple more screw-ups might spell trouble if it allows Russia or China take the wheel. The odd part about this to me is that most of my fellow Americans aren't regularly exposed to how big of a deal national defense is in their country. I mean, we're not that far off from having 1 out of every 100 Americans as active military, so whenever I meet US military members abroad it's always a bit jarring to be thrust back into the reality that war is such a colossal industry and seemingly every country continues to prepare for its arrival as if it were The Winds of Winter.

A couple years ago I was in Lisbon at dinner with this Russian witch I met at a bar the night before. (It was Halloween, by the way, so what did you think I was saying? *Wow, thanks.*) I was really curious to hear her perspective on Putin

because whatever impression I had was certainly based solely upon spoonfed media. When she started talking about her opinion of his border expansion plans and whatnot I had to stop her. *"Wait, that's still a thing? Like, you're telling me that you're still playing the real life version of the board game Risk, and after all these years it's just been sitting inside of a closet with all the pieces still intact? I thought we were done with that, but y'all are just waiting for the right moment to whip it back out?"*

It turned out to be a really enjoyable conversation, plus she spoke with a super thick accent, which was sweet. We joked back and forth about Russian vodka and American burgers, and I was proud to hear her say that I didn't seem like the loud and obnoxious type of American she was expecting. (It's okay if you don't believe me. I wouldn't either.)

One of my not-so-sneaking suspicions is that most of the criticisms Americans get for being overly fratty and never taking things seriously come from people who take things way too seriously and aren't fratty enough. Like, I totally get that the Ugly American archetype (which has its own Wikipedia page) is not for everyone, but don't they get that it's just an act most of the time because Hollywood makes them look super excited about life and stuff, even if that includes being excited about themselves? Think about it. The reason why there aren't rock songs as big as *Born in the USA* about other countries (besides how the recording industry is Americentric) is because most other countries *wouldn't* do something like that in the first place. But at the same time, isn't that *exactly* what made the album so successful in the States? And who cares if the title song was actually *super* prejudiced and/or racist by today's standards, that album was a top 25 best-seller of *all time*. (Lol no, that's genuinely an ~~ugly American~~ awful thing to say. I think I'm done being an ass now.)

Overall, I think most Americans are good people at heart, but some of them are just filling a gap in the stereotype market that nobody else would. In a room full of idiots, who's the leader? The loudest and most overconfident, of course. I mean, there's no possible way that Gilbert Gottfried can be *that* obnoxious and

shrill-sounding when he's in his own home, is there? Either way, that damn voice of his is so memorable (and clearly responsible for his success) that I can still hear it in my head whenever I want just by thinking about Iago the parrot from *Aladdin*.

Alright, the captain says we're getting close to starting our final descent. I can't believe I'm still firing away here, but it wouldn't surprise me if this hardly made any sense and/or if I really did end up looking like an ass from start to finish. (But you know what, being an immigrant these past four years hasn't made total sense either.) Assuming that I mostly *did* look like an ass, I sincerely hope it's because of my own lack of savoir-faire and not because I'm American. And despite this absolutely ridiculous regression that suggests the contrary, I hardly feel very American these days anyway (apart from all the conversations in which I'm deliberately reminded of it).

All in all, it doesn't really matter where we're from because we all woke up one day and happened to have been born in a place we didn't choose. If we *could* choose, I guess I'd probably still be okay with being born in the States because it's the only thing I know and so far my experience has been good enough overall, but I'd definitely prefer my parents to have been born in a country that offers universal healthcare and whatnot so I could get a second passport and not have to worry about it so much.

But despite these things being out of our control, that doesn't stop us from cherry-picking whenever it benefits us anyway, such as how we change the way we talk about our favorite sports teams the day after a big match (i.e., the result is either *we* won, or *they* lost). I know I'm guilty of prevaricating so that I'm American when I want to be, and an immigrant when I don't. On a somewhat related note, I've also seen Brazilians throw tantrums on the Internet whenever people refer to US citizens as *americanos* (because that can also apply to all people of North, South, and Central American countries), but then they'll disassociate with that stance the minute a news article says that an *americano* assaulted someone in São Paulo. (Pick a lane, right?) I mean, I get the "all

squares are rectangles" part of the argument, but *americano* is literally the (Brazilian) Portuguese word used for describing someone from the US (since *estadounidense* is not really used at all), so what are people supposed to do? Shit, back in the day, even Americans like Frank Lloyd Wright tried to change the word in English to "Usonians," but that never caught on. (Obviously because it sounds like ass and you can't even expect people to know how to pronounce it upon reading it for the first time.)

So yeah, expat/immigrant life has certainly been changing over the years, but what remains constant is that there's no substitute for the opportunities I've had to travel all over the world and feel like it's my oyster. It's a crazy privilege to get to see the world the way that some people can, and that presents a pretty big missed opportunity for those who don't have passports. For the ones that do, it's probably important to prepare for what comes socially (if you have a big, obnoxious, American target on your back), because I've certainly had my moments, and I wish I would've done so much better.

To wrap things up, I'm just so glad to be done with this topic so that I won't feel the need to touch it ever again, or at least for a very long time. Politics usually works out when everybody gets the same information, but we all choose what we want to consume these days (for now), and most individual efforts (such as my last 11 hours) make no difference because there's still very little reason for anyone else to consider them. All I can do is speak from my own ~~ass~~ perspective because it's the only one I'll ever get, try not to pretend I know the experiences of others, and then shut up so I can listen and try to understand better. Ugh, that's so corny. I can't believe I went through all of that just to land on such a dorky conclusion. Why do I always do this?

…

I wrote this on a flight from Oakland to Barcelona, 13 April 2018, later piling in the statistics and double-checking my maths on a flight from Berlin to Madrid, 21 April 2018.

xxx

1. Shoutout to my boys who drove me to the hospital after a baseball skipped off a rock one day and completely obliterated my nose. Shoutout to the hospital on campus for taking care of me. Shoutout to my boys again for the two months of balls-to-the-face jokes they started the day I came back. ↑

2. "Quick maths." (For the uninitiated, that's a reference to English comedian Michael Dapaah's rapper persona, Big Shaq. You'll see why I brought this up in a minute.) ↑

3. "Slow maths." (A reference to my dependence upon double-checking everything with a calculator.) ↑

4. Some notable results from individual countries include how the UK reached its highest negative perception (64 percent) towards the US since tracking began in 2005; how negative views from the French went up 17 percent from 2014 and outweighed the positive views for the first time since 2009; how no country reported negative perceptions above Spain's mark of 67 percent; and how, at a measly 7 percent, no country held fewer positive views than Russia. (Of course, lol.) ↑

5. That was a sad, sad day to be in Rio, let me tell you. ↑

6. Sometimes it's hard to tell if written sarcasm will be easy to pick up on without hearing the spoken tone to help out, but this should not be one of those times. ↑

7. I.e., of a mindset derived from an unduly US-focused perspective that tends to consider American experience first, since, you know, O'Doyle rules. (That, and the whole "back-to-back world war champs" thing.) ↑

8. But because my column has picked up steam and I'm starting to share it with a lot more people, I'm finding a need to widen the scope. ↑

9. Lol no, they do *not* insist that. They actually hate it. ↑

10. Did you notice how thoughtful I was to use the British spelling of 'humor' up there? Is that what comedy is? When do I get accepted into Monty Python? Oh, I'm making things worse? Because only an American would make *that* reference? (The deliberate negativity here just feels so extra and

tasteless, doesn't it? That's exactly what I'm trying to say it was like with this kid.) ↑

11. One of which is this more-than-usual elegant British accent evoking high etiquette that also conveniently serves to mask his ironically rude interpersonal behavior, which I bring up not to rag on him, but because I think it's pretty awesome that he has a positive characteristic that's typically a UK stereotype which manages to conceal a negative personal characteristic of his that's typically a US stereotype. Shit, I'd get so many miles out of that. ↑

12. I'd also like to reiterate how overlooked the difference between criticizing the president and criticizing America is, because it's just as strong as the difference between defending America and defending the president. Instead, they're usually lumped together according to whichever seems more objectionable at the time. ↑

13. Which is seven to one in Gross National Income according to the World Bank Atlas. (Again with the 7-1 scoreboard, Brazil? Come on, guys. I'm really trying here.) ↑

14. Views of US Influence, 2017 results by country (± 2014):

    BBC - Global Average: 34% Positive (-8) | 49% Negative (+11)

    Pew - Global Average: 50% Favorable (-9) | 41% Unfavorable (+9)

    BBC - UK, FR, ES, DE Average: 27% Positive (-14) | 57% Negative (+11)

    Pew - UK, FR, ES, DE Average: 41% Favorable (-24) | 54% Unfavorable (+21)

    BBC - Brazil: 42% Positive (-9) | 44% Negative (+6)
    Pew - Brazil: 50% Favorable (-15) | 35% Unfavorable (+8)

    ↑

15. Still being an ass. I shouldn't have to remind you about this. ↑

16. Intermediate speed maths. ↑

17. No more maths jokes for now. I prefer the US way of saying math as short for mathematics anyway. Do they say econs instead of econ as well? Okay wait, even if they're right about maths, they are so unequivocally wrong to say 'drink driving' instead of 'drunk driving.' Whoever came up with that one must've been so ~~drunk~~ drink. ↑

Chapter 10: Footnotes for David

I've seemingly always been the type to get caught up in little fascinations about metacognition (aka the way we think about the way we think), and ever since my column on pet peeves, I've been on a bender of trying to come up with brain teasing questions like, "What's something that you've never told anyone before," and "What's a story that you know you've willingly changed some small details about that you've also told enough times to the point where even *you* believe those details now?"[1]

Clearly these are the deep-seated types of questions that we usually can't even come up with an answer for right away, but they do seem to come fairly easily whenever we find ourselves in real-life situations that jog those particular memories or thoughts.

I think the first question is particularly tough, because normally if something is worth remembering it's probably been worth re-telling at some point too, right? I recently brought this up over a drink with a Scottish ~~girl~~ lass who ended up ghosting me,[2] and although she couldn't think of any memorable responses at the time, I managed to dig one up about myself and shared with her that I've never actually finished reading *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace even though I tell people it's one of my favorite books. (*Pathetic, I know*). To be fair, I have read the beginning a number of times, but the problem is that it's one of the longest published novels ever written in English at over half a million words. [3]

Among all of the people I've never met, I think David Foster Wallace is hands down my biggest influence.[4] And I don't mean that in terms of my writing or anything, because I view him more like an inspirational thinker who happened to lead me down a particular path. (Besides, his writing is also in a completely

different solar system in terms of his skill and creativity anyway,[5] while I'm more of a Jamesian stream of consciousness storyteller kind of guy ~~because I must think I'm interesting or something~~.) Still, as it turns out, DFW inadvertently inspired my decision to pursue philosophy as a double major during my undergraduate studies when an assignment in my first ever philosophy course was focused on an essay of his called *Consider the Lobster*.[6] Then, five years later, I caught wind of what *Time* magazine called one of the most brutally raw and insightful graduation speeches ever given (and often referred to by the name *This is Water*)[7] when an animated video of it went viral on YouTube in 2013, and shortly thereafter I did a presentation on it in my digital media production class at grad school without ever making the connection that it was David Foster Wallace once again. It's also noteworthy (and highly coincidental) that after my presentation that day, one of the other master's students in my program (which only had like 12 people in it) came up to me to mention that her husband was one of the ~350 graduating pupils in attendance for that very speech. Pretty neat.

And now, five *more* years later, I once again find myself gushing over this guy's work, only this time it's his magnum opus aka *Infinite Jest*. First and foremost, this book is considered every English major and/or language lover's dream because of DFW's adept and seamlessly weaving usage[8] of big SAT vocab words[9] that are generally super difficult to use whether you know what they mean or not (because pretty much all of us would somehow have to force them in a sentence by carefully changing everything else around them just to make sure they fit properly), which he does without sounding like he's got a Word-of-the-Day Calendar of Sesquipedalianism,[10] so it makes sense that I would admire that.

The book is also rife with clever little callbacks and one-liners that poke fun at the ins and outs of English,[11] but instead of inserting these the cheap way via character dialogue, DFW sprinkles them throughout the normal course of the novel's body text (which is way harder to do). And yet, despite being full of all that good shit for language nerds,[12] he still splices in colloquial errors and deliberate faux pas every now and then, such as using "like" as a filler word,

like, all the time.[13] I particularly appreciate that because I tried to do exactly the same thing in my first column just to push my dad's buttons.[14] Of course, DFW is *just a bit* more masterful, and he's so good with his artistic license that he breaks the rules sometimes and his prose still allows the story (rather than the reader) to call attention to it as a way for him to correct himself (so the reader doesn't have to), and it's not in a fourth-wall-breaking type of way—it's just stuff that makes you think and read between the lines as if you were inside his head or having a conversation with him because he can insert an error while also letting you know that he knows the error is there without needing to '[sic]' it. I defiantly [sic] can't do that, and I'm not sure my ego would even let me try it.

Alright, let me mop the drool off my Kindle. You get the idea.

So here I am, most certainly finished with *Infinite Jest* by the time I've shared this column, but for now I deliberately stopped with one ordinary novel's length[15] left to go so that I can soak it all in. Given everything I've expressed already, I'm also hyper-aware of how special this position is (and will be) for me personally because of how much I've *identified*[16] with what this man has had to say for so long. It's also a bizarre moment because I somehow already know I'm reading a book that will eventually mean a lot to me despite the fact that I'm still in the middle of reading it.[17]

With that in mind, I'm also trying to take proper care of this process *because* it's my first time reading it and I know I'll never get to experience it the same way again (that is, unless I finally get my Hogwarts letter and learn magic).[18] Furthermore, even though there are guidebooks out there to help new readers understand and follow *Infinite Jest*, I've also committed myself to resisting the temptation of looking up anything online that's supposed to help out because I don't want to spoil my one shot at reading it for the first time with my innocence allegedly maintained. (The closest I think I got to ruining things was skimming this random piece called "*Why you shouldn't read Infinite Jest,*" which is a very hoity toity and Rick-Sanchez-from-C137-esque type of piece that mildly mocks the prospective reader with the following deterring reasons: The book is heavy;

you're not smart; you don't actually read books; you will never read another book again; and you will die alone.)

Altogether, I'm really glad to have finally approached the end, and after getting this far I'm also convinced it was the right time for me to read it now. There are many things I wouldn't have understood fully until this year anyway because of all these oddball German words and references that it has strewn in,[19] though that's not the reason why I think the timing was right. Save for an abundance of first-hand narratives on an array of hard drugs, the incisive perspectives DFW shares on things like accomplishment, loneliness, addiction, recovery, and human nature are all coming at a good pun-intended chapter in my life and I'm grateful for it.

And by the way, you probably figured this out a while ago, but there are so many fucking footnotes in that book it's insane; they take up roughly an eighth of the entire thing.[20] They're also the reason why I've been doing the same thing now, because I just wanted to give it a shot as a tribute, you know? That said, if you've been reading all my footnotes and got lost upon returning to the main text at least once, then I've at least accomplished my goal of doing what he managed to do to me all the friggin' time. On the other hand, if you got annoyed and impatient and decided to start skipping over my footnotes, well then shame on you. I mean, I read an entire book's length of them, so it was the least you could do, especially for David.

As for me, I'm so eager to read the rest of his life's work, and I'm selfishly saddened that it was cut short.[21]

…

I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Nice, 7 May 2018 and from Nice to Berlin, 10 May 2018, piling in exact quotes and transcriptions on later flights.

xxx

1. This is tricky because you still have to know those small details are false even though you *effectively* changed your memory to make them true, which is technically paradoxical. Still, the mind is certainly capable of something like that, and George Costanza's character proved it on Seinfeld: "Jerry, just remember: It's not a lie, if you believe it." ↑

2. Do you remember when I mentioned that dating me right now is like driving stick shift in a traffic jam? Yeah, so we actually hit things off pretty well in Berlin, but then I was away in Stockholm, and then she was away in Edinburgh, and then I was away in Austin, San Francisco, and then Milan when it finally turned into radio silence—*but hey, at least I'm out here catching flights instead of catching feelings*. ↑

3. 543,709 words to be exact, which Wikipedia labels as 13th longest. And so the thing is, if you read 100,000 words at an average pace, we're talking eight or nine hours to not even get through 20 percent of the book. On top of that, the content is so dense and initially tough to follow that any significant hiatus from reading means that picking up where you left off is simply impossible if you want to maintain any reasonable level of understanding. What you end up doing is starting over several times, which makes the book, on the whole, a beast of a mountain to climb and several other mixed metaphors that emphasize my point. It's just massive, okay? ↑

4. Dwyane Wade is probably a close second, but I consider him to be more of an impactful butterfly than an influence (because had it not been for Wade's basketball career at Marquette, I don't think I would've ever known enough about the university to apply and eventually enroll there, and without doing that I probably wouldn't have ended up at Stanford for grad school, and without doing that I probably wouldn't have moved to Brazil, and then to Germany, *and you get the point*.) ↑

5. Take, for example, this quote-unquote "relatively small" unbroken selection from a larger, unbroken passage of *Infinite Jest*: "That the cliché 'I don't know who I am' unfortunately turns out to be more than a cliché. That it costs $330 U.S. to get a passport in a phony name. That other people can often see things about you that you yourself cannot see, even if those people are stupid. That you can obtain a major credit card with a phony name for $1500 U.S., but that no one will give you a straight answer about whether

this price includes a verifiable credit history and line of credit for when the cashier slides the phony card through the register's little verification-modem with all sorts of burly security guards standing around. That having a lot of money does not immunize people from suffering or fear. That trying to dance sober is a whole different kettle of fish. That the term *vig* is street argot for the bookmaker's commission on an illegal bet, usually 10%, that's either subtracted from your winnings or added to your debt. That certain sincerely devout and spiritually advanced people believe that the God of their understanding helps them find parking places and gives them advice on Massachusetts Lottery numbers. That cockroaches can, up to a certain point, be lived with. That 'acceptance' is usually more a matter of fatigue than anything else. That different people have radically different ideas of basic personal hygiene. That, perversely, it is often more fun to want something than to have it. That if you do something nice for somebody in secret, anonymously, without letting the person you did it for know it was you or anybody else know what it was you did or in any way or form trying to get credit for it, it's almost its own form of intoxicating buzz. That anonymous generosity, too, can be abused. That having sex with someone you do not care for feels lonelier than not having sex in the first place, afterward. That it is permissible to want. That everybody is identical in their secret unspoken belief that way deep down they are different from everyone else. That this isn't necessarily perverse." ↑

6. *Consider the Lobster* is a review of the 2003 Maine Lobster Festival that either assembles a discussion or proposes an argument (whichever you prefer) over the ethics behind boiling lobsters alive for the sake of increasing the amount of gustatory pleasure for the person eating it, factoring in the sensory neurons of the lobsters themselves. My class assignment was to dissect the essay and break it down into the premise-conclusion relationship of a logically sound (interpret: mathematically correct) argument, complete with all of the sub-premises to sub-premises to sub-premises. My submission ended up being one of the only ones in the class that was mostly right (*don't ask me how*), and I already liked the subject matter, so that boosted my confidence enough for me to abandon my Spanish coursework and make room for more philosophy classes. (And sure, this may sound and/or *be* pretty insignificant, but I don't know, it kinda means/meant something to me.) ↑

7. Presented at the 2005 Kenyon College Commencement Ceremony, this

speech was written and given as a wake-up call, an encouraging reminder, and a reality check for budding graduates on finding purpose and living with compassion while knowing and accepting that the day-in, day-out routine of a mundane adult life where everybody else is seen as an obstacle that's merely "in my way" is a choice of perspective. It posits that "the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about," and it begins like this: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" ↑

8. Aka real and proper usage, aka "The way in which a word or phrase is normally and correctly used," aka the way the word 'usage' was intended back around the year 1700 by guys like Daniel Defoe, but instead everybody runs around saying 'usage' as if it meant 'use' and they've done this for so long that whoever the language and dictionary authorities are felt the need to make that an acceptable alternate definition which allows people to say things like "data usage" and "a nice usage of color" but now you're here with me knowing full well that it's all bullshit and the word 'usage' is for the normative and the prescriptive rather than the descriptive and I swear I'm not pissy about it at all. (By the way, I'm not really a prescriptivist, I just play one in real life.) ↑

9. E.g., Enfilade, Retinue, Abrade, Fantods, Neuralgic, Elan, Apocopes, Prolix, Perfidiously, Somatic, Denuded, Acutance, Ephebes, Piebald, Cognomen, Quiescent, Apercu, Postprandial, Kismet, Cunctation, Erumpent, Sobriquet, Extramural, Tabescent, Sulcus, Oubliettes, Pulchritudinous, Tumescence, Evincing, Atavistic, Effete, Sedulously, Puerile, Imbricate, Glabrous, Genuflecting, Insouciant, Amanuensis, Skirling, Connubial, Cognoscenti, Abeyant, Etier, Peripatetic, Buttonhole, Moribund, Nystagmus, Suborned, Sanguine, Redolent, Lissome, Obstreperous, Coeval, Confabulation, Foibles, Palliative, etc… ↑

10. Sesquipedalianism is the use of long, often multisyllabic and obscure words that seem out of place (which it probably was, and that's exactly my point when I say that DFW does it more naturally). I'd also like to point out how neat it is that sesquipedalianism is an autological word, meaning it is what it describes (i.e., by being long and obscure, it fits its own definition). ↑

11. E.g., "She referred to her father as her Old Man, which you can just tell she capitalizes." / "Avril and Hal had a brief good-natured argument about whether the term circa could modify an interval or only a specific year." / "We've been moving forward full-bore on anticipating various highly involved relocation scenarios. Scenaria? Is it scenarios or scenaria?" [And later]: "We foresee a whole lot of people moving south really really fast. We foresee cars, light trucks, heavier trucks, buses, Winnebagos — Winnebaga?" / "Hal and Avril hashed out whether misspoke was a bona fide word." / "He keeps imagining the little hyphen of wrinkle Poutrincourt gets between her eyebrows when she doesn't follow something and can't quite tell if it's your English's fault or her English's fault." / "Both Pemulis and Freer had pronounced a hard g in angst, Hal would have observed." ↑

12. My personal favorite is when he goes double meta with, "Are these little explanations aggravating [sic]?" inside of a footnote just to wink at the reader (who, like you, probably can't stand all these tangents because it's hard to stay on track) while simultaneously pointing out the common and agitating usage error of saying 'aggravating' to mean 'agitating.' (Prescriptively, 'aggravate' means to have a pre-existing condition or problem worsened, while 'agitate' means to trouble the mind or annoy/bother/etc.) Still, the bastardization of English continues as I'm sure 'aggravate' will soon be awarded that alternative accepted definition if it hasn't already, and I promise I'm not upset about that. ↑

13. E.g., "He calmly insisted on sleeping there in their home that very night; no hotel: it was like crucial to get right back on the emotional horse." / "In the envelope were a standard American Dental Association glossy brochure on the importance of daily oral hygiene — available at like any dentist's office anywhere." / "That sometimes human beings have to just sit in one place and, like, hurt." / "You can raise the pole to like twice its original height." / "...a father who somewhere around the nadir of his professional fortunes apparently decided to go down to his Raid-sprayed basement workshop and build a promising junior athlete the way other fathers might restore vintage autos or build ships inside bottles, or like refinish chairs." ↑

14. The line in question was, "I haven't written and/or published a column in like five years or so..." (Side note: I knew my father would be reading it and then lose his shit over it in the first place because of how my second column was going to be so him-centric that I'd undoubtedly be sharing both

with him. Sure enough, he pointed out the egregious mistake when he wrote back to me, "I read your column. I enjoyed everything except the 'in like five years' part." Lol, what a guy.) ↑

15. About 80,000 words, or the average length for most 20th century books, which is still only 15 percent of *Infinite Jest*. ↑

16. This was my one and only easter egg wink to other people who have read the book. There you go. ↑

17. Relevant movie reference: *[Dark Helmet lifts helmet and quietly whispers to Colonel Sandurz]* "How can there be a cassette of Spaceballs: the Movie? We're still in the middle of making it!" ↑

18. Really, though, imagine how many people would pay top dollar to experience reading the Harry Potter series for the first time again if it were possible. Now that's a lobotomy worth looking into. Sign me up, Gilderoy. ↑

19. Example: "Few foreigners realize that the German term Berliner is also the vulgate idiom for a common jelly doughnut, and thus that Kennedy's seminal 'Ich bin ein Berliner' was greeted by the Teutonic crowds with a delight only apparently political." ↑

20. In total, the footnotes are roughly 70,000 words. (For reference, *The Catcher in the Rye*: 73,404 words; *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 78,462 words; *1984*: 88,942 words.) So you can imagine how frustrating it is to forget you were in the footnotes until you reach the end of a 20-pager, only to return back to its parent position absolutely lost. ↑

21. David Foster Wallace committed suicide at age 46 on September 12, 2008 after losing a bout with severe depression. Throughout *Infinite Jest*, Wallace had given an illuminating amount of self-harm related emotions to his characters, often delving into captivating detail, such as the following passage: "The authoritative term psychotic depression makes Kate Gompert feel especially lonely. Specifically the psychotic part. Think of it this way. Two people are screaming in pain. One of them is being tortured with electric current. The other is not. The screamer who's being tortured with electric current is not psychotic: her screams are circumstantially appropriate. The screaming person who's not being tortured, however, is

psychotic, since the outside parties making the diagnoses can see no electrodes or measurable amperage. One of the least pleasant things about being psychotically depressed on a ward full of psychotically depressed patients is coming to see that none of them is really psychotic, that their screams are entirely appropriate to certain circumstances, part of whose special charm is that they are undetectable by any outside party. Thus the loneliness: it's a closed circuit: the current is both applied and received from within. The so-called 'psychotically depressed' person who tries to kill herself doesn't do so out of quote 'hopelessness' or any abstract conviction that life's assets and debits do not square. And surely not because death seems suddenly appealing. The person in whom *It*s invisible agony reaches a certain unendurable level will kill herself the same way a trapped person will eventually jump from the window of a burning high-rise. Make no mistake about people who leap from burning windows. Their terror of falling from a great height is still just as great as it would be for you or me standing speculatively at the same window just checking out the view; i.e. the fear of falling remains a constant. The variable here is the other terror, the fire's flames: when the flames get close enough, falling to death becomes the slightly less terrible of two terrors. It's not desiring the fall; it's terror of the flames. And yet nobody down on the sidewalk, looking up and yelling 'Don't!' and 'Hang on!', can understand the jump. Not really. You'd have to have personally been trapped and felt flames to really understand a terror way beyond falling." As a result, thousands of Wallace's readers and critics have since expressed their desire to read the note he left for his wife at the time of his death, citing that his superhuman ability to convert thoughts, emotions, and feelings into language might help us understand what being on the brink might actually be like. Thankfully, out of respect, this note has remained private with his wife. ↑

Chapter 11: Cockpit Confessionals

Once upon a time, my grandpa Jack gave me an old framed picture of a ship that I imagine he worked on in the US Navy. I was very happy to have been gifted this item because I had never seen it before and it must have been important to him. I rested it (unfixed) on the inside pane of my bedroom door. Sure enough, one day it fell and the glass that covered the picture went to pieces.

As a bumbling tweenager with no clue how to fix it, I sheepishly decided to hide it behind a pile of things on my dresser and forgot about it. Then one day my grandparents came to visit and Grandpa Jack stopped by my room to say hello. He noticed it on his way out—*I'm sure he noticed it*—but nobody said anything at the time and neither of us ever did.

Even though I can't fault my younger self for the accident, I regret being too ashamed to talk about it because now I look back and see a situation that (on face value) indicated a lack of appreciation, and an egregious one at that.

I'm guessing it must have happened 15 years ago, but I still think about it sometimes when I'm alone in my thoughts.

Being alone in my thoughts is something that's pretty normal for me lately because I've logged 12 flights in the last month and a half. And even though you're always surrounded by people on your way to and from the airport, during security, in the terminal, and on the plane itself, your social interaction tends to be limited unless you go out of your way for it—or if you're traveling with somebody else. Naturally, since few self-respecting people would opt to juggle a travel and work schedule as aggressive as mine's been lately, that means I'm in transit and ~~forever~~ alone constantly.

I'm also not the type to waste a ton of commuter time on my phone due to how I get headaches when I read on trains and buses, so I waste time thinking about random nonsense instead. That said, with all these flights and haphazard thoughts coming in such a tight window, I've recently come to the conclusion that I hope I never become so self-absorbed that I forget to stop and think about how weird life is. (Surely I'm self-absorbed in several other ways already, but this one is off-limits for me.)

So today, I figured I would share and/or confess as many of those thoughts and memories as I can remember or scribbled down. At the same time, since my last few columns took a ton of extra work to pull together, I also don't mind taking the opportunity to phone this one in by copying and pasting. It'll probably be more fun and easier to digest anyway, just please don't expect any fancy segues.

….

If I'm ever listening to music and find myself alone at a public transportation stop or underground station, I immediately begin pretending I'm in a music video for whatever song is playing. The security cam footage is probably at embarrassing levels of pricelessness, but I bet if Soulja Boy saw those dance moves he'd be relevant enough again for people to understand this reference.

I wonder why we pronounce the names Mario and Maria with emphasis in different spots? Sure, Maria often has an accent on the *i*, but it's still weird because Dario and Daria, for example, have the same spot of emphasis.

Refrigerator doors that slowly swing open by themselves until they bounce on their hinges always make me nervous no matter how often I see them withstand

the weight.

When dogs and cats are having puppies and kittens, isn't it weird how we call the groups of births 'litters,' as if they're just tossing discarded material on the floor? Isn't it also weird that 'litter' is what we call the stuff housecats take dumps in, too?

You can tell how close you are to some people based on whether or not you make sure they know when you actually laughed out loud at a message they sent by writing back something like, "Haha I lolled at that."

Isn't it weird how our eyeballs can be upside-down. Like, eyes are mostly round yet our brains still assign them a single up direction. Why didn't we evolve to have our brains just account for our head tilts like those sippy cups for toddlers that you can't spill no matter how you twist and turn them? I get that eyes are attached to optic nerves, but still. It could work.

If you play a song for other people and ask them to listen closely to the lyrics, do they listen as if you're the one in the first-person position speaking the words or do they assume that role for themselves? I can't figure that out.

Sometimes when I'm taking a shower I keep my eyes closed to raise the level of difficulty.

I suspect ghosts are real but only in instances where they can be perverts, because when I close my eyes in the shower I often lose my balance. Why else would I only lose my balance when I'm naked and vulnerable in a slippery enclosure? It has to be those kinky ghosts.

History has shown that when a largely manufactured food item has a rebrand of its packaging, and *if* that new packaging also ends up mentioning something *about* having new packaging, 100 percent of the time it's going to say, "New look, same great taste."

No matter how drunk you are, knowing all the words to any song is not impressive to other people.

A surprising fraction of men aren't aware that, to get the last sputtering drops out when peeing, all it takes is a light press on the prostate from the perineum aka the taint. These men instead use the shake method, some of them even shaking it like a British nanny. Now, if you're anything like me and you find yourself wondering where that phrase came from, and if that's a real thing (i.e., do British nannies shake babies?), the answer is there was a murder trial in 1997 over a British au pair who shook a baby in Massachusets. So that's that, I guess.

At my childhood swim team pool, there was this beefy lifeguard dude who had a big belly and long surfer blond hair. His name was Biff, and once a year he would grease up a watermelon and throw it into the deep end for everyone to try to get out of the pool. That's all I remember of him and I'm not sure if it's even accurate.

One of my catchphrases that I've definitely mentioned in a previous column is that we're all the main characters in our own lives, and as a result we tend to think about ourselves a lot; on the flip side of that is how we're all background characters to everyone else, which means they don't think about us very much. (Well, that seems to apply to me for everyone except Biff. I think about that guy every now and then and I wonder what he's up to today.)

Who in the world decided that yogurt would come in those tiny little cups? It's either that or the humongous tubs you could drown a baby in. You know what? I think I've reached the point in my life where I'm just not going to waste any more time trying to get the last bit of yogurt out. No more scraping with a spoon, and no more sticking my finger in there. So from now on unless there's a dog nearby to snout it out, I'm throwing it away.

And when it comes to yogurt that kids eat out of those long plastic tubes, I'm not sure there's a more anxiety-inducing feeling in the world than when you're squeezing the yogurt towards your mouth while also creating the agonizing fear that you might smack yourself in the face if your fingers slip. It's the same feeling you get when you're staring down the ice cubes at the bottom of a drinking glass, holding on for dear life before they suddenly avalanche at your face. I mean, the yogurt tube is right there in front of you. You're looking *right at it*. If you looked at it any closer your eyes might cross. There's nobody else but you controlling your hands on this dumb tube and yet you're constantly on the brink of betraying yourself. It wouldn't even be a backstab in this case, since again, it's *right in front of your face*. But let's not forget the important part: you want that yogurt. You *need* that yogurt. And you're going to risk it all because there's no other way. Please tell me why this dairy product is so terrorizing. Maybe lactose intolerance is something people decided to make up because they were sick (*ha*) and tired of living in fear.

I miss how CDs used to come with those little booklets inside the covers that sometimes had all the song lyrics; the ones that did were the best.

I think it's unfair when we say that we don't like people who don't like dogs. I think the right thing to say in such situations would be: "I'm not judging you because you don't like dogs, but it's just that *overall*, I don't trust your judgment." Maybe that's worse but it's probably more accurate.

This one is a bit tasteless, but when are they going to change the phrase from

"getting a massage" to "playing a game of *Don't Get a Boner*?" (I mentioned it was tasteless, but please consider that I'm not the type of guy who gets *those* kinds of massages. To each his own though.)

There used to be a place on the riverfront in Wilmington, Delaware called Kahunaville, which was this tropical-themed restaurant in a fake volcano that also had a bunch of those tokenized games for kids that would spit out tickets to redeem for prizes. It was 100 percent a children's casino. It was also the place that I have this one photographically unforgettable memory of my father being an absolute trooper and wearing clothes the kids got him for his birthday (specifically, an orange Tee shirt underneath a deep blue Hawaiian shirt) in an attempt to get him to dress cooler. He must've felt like a complete dickhead but he did it for us and that's a beautiful thing.

Finding money in clothes you haven't worn in a while (aka surprise money pockets) is great because you're getting rewarded for being forgetful. I'm not sure if that's better or worse than being rewarded for being retentive, such as guessing your password from an online account you made 4 years ago. That feels just as good because you feel as if you've outsmarted yourself, like, "*Gotcha bitch! You can't fool meeeee.*"

I'm not quite sure why foods can often be categorized as tasting savory, sweet, hot, and/or sour, but other ones like cheesy and salty can sometimes enter into the mix, too. How can that be? Like, both salt and cheese are individual foods already, so how can they be tastes rather than flavors? Then again, hot is sometimes a flavor as well (i.e. you know exactly which 'hot' you're getting when it's the flavor of Cheetos or something and it can't be anything different) so I'm lost on all accounts here.

I'm pretty sure that, for any story to make me laugh, the best way it could ever start is, "Okay, so we were at Señor Frogs…"

You know the joke that goes, "If 'pro' is the opposite of 'con,' then progress is the opposite of Congress?" Well, I kinda wish that since protons are positive that electrons would instead be called controns. Better yet, how about negatrons? I bet that'll get kids interested in science class.

There are some people in life that snort when they laugh just for the added attention it brings and it's obvious.

Being all wet is like the cleanest form of being dirty.

Perhaps the most satisfying feeling you can ever get while driving a car (within reason) comes via a maneuver which my siblings and I call "The Cole Allen Special," named after some kid who I think used to babysit us. It's this 'beating the system' type of move you can do when you want to make a left turn but already see up ahead that you're going to run into a red light preventing it. Instead, you quickly pop over to the right lane, make a legal right-hand turn (on red if necessary), immediately make your next legal U-turn, and then go straight to your originally intended path while the light is still green in this direction. As you go through the intersection you can often make eye contact with someone stuck in the original left turn lane you would have been waiting in and it feels so good.

No matter how awesome you think some new remix/cover of Blackstreet's song, *No Diggity* that you or your friend found is, you're wrong. It sucks.

I don't think I've ever learned what second cousins twice removed properly means. I thought second cousins would just be the cousins of my cousins to whom I'm not really related. I guess it also has to do with my cousin's children

or something. I have absolutely no idea how any of this works but now that you mention it I'm my own grandpa.

It's a hard-to-swallow pill, but you get zero credit for having introduced your ex to something (such as a food or a hobby) that he or she was not very keen on when you first got together but then warmed up to it just in time for it to become a staple in your ex's next relationship with someone new.

I think the hardest thing to prove you deliberately spelled wrong is any word that you've deliberately spelled wrong in one of your passwords. It's like, if a friend needed to share a password with you, and it happened to be "Turtels452," you would totally think your friend doesn't know how to spell "turtles."

This might sound super weird and/or tin-foil-hatty, but every now and then I make sure that I'm not watching my own fingers type one particular password of mine on a keyboard, and I make a concerted effort not to look when I enter it, and it's all because my subconscious has somehow decided to imagine a crazy dystopian scenario in which there might be a hidden camera in my eyes, so even if someone else could see what I see, at least my password would still be safe.

Social facilitation is the phenomenon regarding our tendency to perform differently when people are watching us versus when we're alone. Considering that golf is the biggest spectator sport in which the ball is literally *motionless* at the time a player goes to hit it, I feel like golf has to be the number one human activity for finding out who is the coolest under pressure, at least in terms of motor skills.

It kind of sucks that our default assumption is that we are going to age well, but boy that will suck for those of us (and let's face it, probably me) who won't. Imagine just getting worse looking *more so than average* and having virtually no

say about it.

I think one of the clearest signs that you've truly made it as a creator of something big in pop culture is when the porn industry makes a parody of it.

There is nothing quite like the disappointment of suddenly hearing the jingle of what you think to be a dog's collar only to look up and discover that it was actually the sound of someone locking a bicycle to a pole.

You can be shy and also talkative. Those aren't mutually exclusive.

'Outstrip' is a word that you can't really use in group conversations because it's not common enough that everyone knows what it means, and it doesn't mean what half the group might guess it would. (It means to go faster than something and pass it). At the same time, a compound fracture (which sounds like it means a fracture in more than one place, but it really means that the bone broke visibly through the skin) is one of those things that's so oddly named that you have no choice but to remember it forever.

Even if we don't, it's far more enjoyable to believe we live in a world where romance is fated, where confidence plays a role in ways it logically shouldn't (such as gambling), and where certain coincidences happen due to us having willed them into existence.

Flying around Europe makes me miss baseball because you never see baseball fields from plane windows out here like you do in the States. I miss baseball because it teaches us how the brain can tacitly understand the body's capabilities. For example, I could pick up a ball and throw it as far as I could, but

having not played in years, I wouldn't be able to guess with any degree of precision how far I would throw it. Had my arm been conditioned in mid-season baseball form, I'd pretty much know exactly how far I could throw it within ten feet or so—but the point is I wouldn't have actively recorded that data in any decided way, I'd just know.

I think it's super funny how the word 'sloppy' always comes up as a suggested term in the search field of my email account because of the one time I looked around for my mom's recipe for sloppy joes.

It must be weird growing up in a time when the 30s were always talked about as a decade of the past, only to someday reach the next set of 30s when they become the present and therefore a new past after that. The thing is, nobody who lived through the old transition is around when the next one happens, so no two generations ever talk to each other to share feelings about how weird that is. *This one keeps me up at night.*

Why do we always think that the invention of time travel would come with a way to travel back as well? I bet we'd only be able to invent a one-way option first. With that in mind, would you still do it if you could?

Even if you got caught doing something illegal while time traveling, as long as they were required to use the fact of your successful travel through time as part of the evidence against you, you'd be like, *"Yeah, I did it. By time traveling. That's right, did you hear me? I was tiiiiiime traveling."*

I'm finally starting to regret how I never did anything with the first novel I was writing that I put over 50,000 words into several years ago. It seems like it was a missed opportunity to honor my grandmother too, because I made sure to have the main character's grandma think all dogs were boys and all cats were girls,

and that the 'Blvd' abbreviation on street signs stood for 'beloved' (so she'd call it Sunset Beloved instead of Boulevard). Sometimes I feel like there was a lot of other stuff in there that'd still be relevant to reference in everyday conversation, but there's absolutely *nothing* lamer than plugging your own *unpublished* novel. Even I can't stoop that low. Twice.

I think it's totally okay to have regrets and it's totally okay to admit having them as well. Nevertheless, there's this big fat tension over how we should be living life with no regrets, but that's stupid because regretting stuff helps us improve our decision-making. (I think any attempted qualification here to say crap like, "Oh but you didn't regret it at the time" or whatever is just equivocating. We don't have to fool ourselves to have the illusion that we're living without regrets if regrets help us get better anyway.)

I feel stupid about my Grandfather's picture frame. I regret that bigtime. Do I think I'd make the same choice now? Hell no, but regretting it might make me recognize similar situations where I'm overlooking somebody's feelings—which is probably a good thing for a 13-year-old to be learning.

There's no real point in having a secret PIN that you think is clever for some reason since you aren't supposed to be telling anyone anyway so how could they appreciate it? (Unless you're doing it for your own amusement, which might be selfish but I guess that's still okay.)

In the same vein, I can't call this a confessional of otherwise platform-less thoughts unless I actually confess something juicy. So here goes nothing…

When I first got my permit to start learning how to drive, my sister had just gotten a Honda Civic. (Point of order: keep in mind for my sake that I've never gotten a ticket to this day and I've never been the driver in any roadside

collisions. I *have* backed into a mailbox and some other shit that wasn't moving but who hasn't? We all attest that we're great drivers and I'm gonna do the same.)

So anyway, one day when I was 16, I headed out with my mom to practice driving for the first or second time in my sister's new car. The turning radius on this little bugger was crazy, and I didn't even make it completely out of the driveway before I cut the turn too close and hit the mailbox on the back right passenger door. My mom freaked out and there was a huge scratch on the plastic panel of the window. We couldn't turn back because we had a driveway alarm sensor (like a metal detector) that would jingle in the house and everybody would know we had just left and then suddenly come back. So we kept going with the practice and then my mom hatched a flawless plan.

When we got home, she brought up the bright idea of taking everyone to the movies in my sister's car. Of course, I took the back right seat to minimize the chance that anybody else would see the damage, and we headed to the theater (which was also the place where the Cole Allen Special became patented). After the movie, we all came back to the parking lot and the charade was on. "Omg, what happened?" "Was it like that before we went in?" "There's no way!" "They didn't even leave a note!"

Looking back, it's possible that my mom had simply told everyone what happened and my family just played along without my knowledge so that I wouldn't feel bad. (*I sincerely don't know if that's the case, but I'm assuming I'll find out soon after this.*) But the thing is, that never mattered anyway because my reality from that day until now has always been that I've had a graveyard pact with my mom over this, even though she probably hasn't thought about it in 10 years. I hope she doesn't mind that I caved, but it was for a good cause.

Either way, it might be the funniest story I remember about my family that nobody else knows and I think about it *all the time*. I'm so sorry to my sister

about it (since we never even got it fixed), but I'd do it again because from that day on I knew my mom had my back forever. Before that, I was never 100 percent sure because when I was little, right after learning what the middle finger meant I decided to toss one up at her from the driveway as she drove off to the grocery store in a hurry, having not taken me with her that day for whatever totally legitimate reason an 8-year-old wouldn't understand.

Reminiscent of the Battle of Bunker Hill, I'll never forget seeing the whites of her eyes from a mile away as she pulled her minivan into the neighborhood when I came out to help carry in groceries and pretended everything was normal. The sad part is, no matter how hard I try, that's as far along as the memory goes. I just can't remember any further so I assume I simply blacked out in fear—most likely because she bought 3 boxes of those yogurt tubes and that must have immediately tripped a fuse of self-inflicted, face-punching PTSD.

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I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Catania, 15 May 2018 and Catania to Berlin, 18 May 2018.

XXX

Chapter 12: Chopped Lettuce

I've probably hinted at it several times so far, but if it hasn't been clear yet I'll go ahead and explicitly state the following: without a doubt, I have the biggest nerd boner for learning and studying languages. I'm actually a bit surprised I haven't pumped out a lengthy column about that stuff already (languages, not boners) because I think I've done enough overthinking about tips and tricks and immersion tactics to come up with something useful (or at least thought-provoking) to share. I still have no clue how long I'll manage to keep this stretch of columns going, but I bet I'll have time to pool/pull some thoughts together as long as I keep racking up flights.

In the meantime, before I forget, one of the tips for language learners that I swear by—*which also sounds obvious but totally isn't*—is to do whatever it takes to speed up the process for you to incorporate and begin thinking in another language's idiomatic expressions and patterns of speech (as opposed to thinking in your own language and then attempting to translate what you want to say word for word). Clearly that's a really tough adjustment to make and it doesn't happen all at once, but in my *rarely humble* opinion it's pretty much the most important threshold to cross for anyone who is serious about adding another language. The problem is, even if you're living in a country that speaks the desired language, it's still difficult to find situations in which you can take consistent baby steps because most interactions require you to be at a decent level from the get-go.

The reason why stepping up your idiom game is so important is because it helps you set expectations for predicting dialogue and it also helps you figure out how you're supposed to think in the other language in the first place. Idioms already don't make much sense because they're groups of words that, when together, have totally separate meanings from what the individual words do, so how can anybody have grounds to understand them right off the bat? In turn, getting a leg up on idioms helps you avoid feeling caught in a pickle when a cat's got your

tongue and you don't know how to say something, and I may be going out on a limb here but I'll take a shot in the dark and chalk that up as the entire essence of what makes learning a new language challenging, *right*? Or maybe I'm cutting corners.

Some of the most essential turns of phrases don't even match up from language to language, yet often we don't even notice how difficult they can be for non-native speakers because they're so common that we tend to assume it's the way reality ought to be interpreted. My favorite example is how we indicate existence. In English, we say '*there is*' and '*there are,*' as if to say that something is currently being/happening somewhere out in the abstract world (because 'there' only becomes a particular place after we specify it). Spanish speakers express this concept simply by using the verb *haber* which means 'to have,' as if to say the world *has* something that exists. Interestingly enough, *haber* isn't used much when they're talking about people having things because they use the verb *tener* instead. In Portuguese, however, the equivalent verb *ter* is used both for things existing and the possession of them. If you're still not convinced, Germans will say *es gibt*, which translates to 'it gives' as if to say the world gives it existence, or it's a given that it exists, or whatever.

If you can imagine how bizarre it must sound in English to hear 'it gives no time' or 'have no time' when someone means '*there is no time,*' it must be just as unintelligible to hear '*dort ist keine Zeit*' and '*allí es no tiempo*' translated word for word. It kind of makes you wonder how much added effort it takes just to keep track of idioms and rules that don't make sense. Take, for example, 'selling like hotcakes.' Umm, hotcakes aren't flying off the shelves these days (since carbs are the devil no matter what language you speak). Also, it must be *so* easy to misuse 'btw' in a sentence, such as this one: "You can tell how a man will treat his wife btw he treats his mother."

The sheer volume of nuance is enough to defend how finding ways to improve your expectations with baby steps can make all the difference. It's also why I still have no idea what some German guy said to me at the gym during my first

few months in Berlin when he asked me to spot him on the bench press. The only thing I could have possibly guessed at the time was *kannst du mir helfen* [can you help me], and when your only expectation ends up being wrong it's easy to get so lost that you don't even hear what was actually said.

Ultimately, this guy ended up flexing on me with both his muscles and his language mastery when he switched to English and the first thing out of his mouth ("*Can you give me a hand*") was an idiom. There's only two ways I can imagine it would make sense in German to say *Kannst du mir ein Hand geben*, and that's if you were either Dr. Frankenstein talking to Igor, or if you were playing with *Herr Kartoffelkopf* aka Mr. Potato Head.

So anyway, the notion of alternating from one set of idioms to another, and thus being able to think in either language, is something I like to call *light switching* —but that's totally made up and not an official term. If you're familiar with linguistics you may have heard of a similar but different concept that inspired the name called *code switching,* which is when a multilingual person alternates (often accidentally) between two languages in the same conversation. Code switching usually occurs when a certain concept or phrase in a different language tends to fit better or less awkwardly than it does in the current one being spoken; in my experience it can happen with just a single word that triggers a switch, such as *contramão* instead of *the wrong way on a one-way,* or *hay* instead of *there are* (hey would you look at that!), and it often leads to the exchange being carried on in that second language as long as the speakers are aware that everyone else comprehends it, at least hopefully.

Regardless of all that, I want to steer away from code switching here because that has to do with contact linguistics in regards to how bilingualism can impact and ultimately influence the other speakers in shared conversations. In contrast, this idea of light switching is all about your own internal processing and reproduction of information in regards to learning a new language and being able to speak it yourself.

I suppose blathering on about this stuff is no good unless it answers the question of how to do it. For me, the most useful trick has been to establish new communication channels in the other language as soon as possible because the more times you can force yourself into recurring elementary situations, the better off you will be. A great way to do this, particularly if you're living in a place that speaks the language, is to become a regular at a restaurant or a relatively uncrowded bar. By going once per week and engaging in the same basic script with the same employees and servers, you immediately have a real-life opportunity to grow your skills in a mostly fixed environment where the other parties know both you (and more importantly) your level of aptitude.

Keep in mind that this generally only works if you commit to speaking the new language and nothing else. More often than not, that's because when you're around a given person, the language you'll feel most comfortable speaking is the one in which you both became acquainted—so it's important to establish the right precedent. This might help explain why it almost never works according to plan when we try to learn from bilingual friends or lovers. I mean, it's just not very sustainable to downgrade to an inferior level of communication when there's a more advanced option on the table, unless you have eons of free time. Since you probably don't, falling back on the easy option for the sake of efficiency ends up reducing consistency and slowing down progress towards thinking in the language you wanted.

Overall, the challenge is less about overcoming the convenience of having a more effective contingency language, and more about how we sometimes just *feel* like we know people better in whatever language they originally became familiar to us with, which, until we become highly proficient in the other language, we probably do. And that's one thousand times more comfortable. Learning to speak a new language is difficult because it makes us feel uncomfortable; at the same time, one of our primal instincts is to seek comfort especially if it's one that we already know.

Have you ever noticed that whatever look you're sporting when you meet

someone oftentimes ends up being the look that this particular person prefers you with the most? Well, they like you that way because it makes them comfortable, plain and simple. Hell, sometimes we even stick to certain appearances ourselves because we're so used to them that we forget change is an option. To that extent my college roommate once told me a story about his dad that will blow your mind's tits completely off.

First of all, this man managed to grow a cookie duster mustache at the tail end of middle school. That is a feat in itself; however, he proceeded to keep rocking that crumb catcher non-stop throughout high school, too. If you thought it stopped there, *you just wait*. This dude went on to become Chief Deputy at his local Sheriff's Office (where lip strips are naturally encouraged) and had never once gotten rid of his flavor savor even after eclipsing 50 years of age. Now let me tell you what that means.

It means his kids had never once seen their father's bare upper lip their entire childhoods. It means his wife had married a man with a face she'd never once gotten a glimpse of clean-shaven. It means the man himself had gone his entire life without knowing what his own adult face looked like sans catterlipper, and he was still going strong. Unbelievable. How could you not even be curious? That goes beyond being comfortable, right? I mean, four years tops and then it becomes, "I don't know what I look like without a mustache and at this point I'm too afraid to find out."

A couple weeks after I heard that story I went home and buzzed my own head. I *had* to know what it looked like. Then I started to grow my hair out longer than I ever had before because I obviously *had* to know what that looked like too. Afterwards, I kept it at a solid medium length over the course of many years until I started letting it hit my shoulders for a few more after that, like it is today.

The reason I bring this up is because I'm about to cut my hair all the way short for the first time in over a half dozen years, and everything I've said so far was

just a setup so I could talk about it. No, really, *everything.* All that stuff about learning languages (which was genuine material, by the way) was just a massive red herring so that I didn't have to open with something so cosmetically vain. I even said "In the meantime before I forget," like it was going to be quick but that was part of the plan all along and I'm sorry.

Anyway, here's the real column:

...

I'm on my way to New York City for my brother's wedding right now and I'm planning to cut all my hair off the following day (or the one after that). Now, under normal circumstances you'd expect someone in my situation to be cutting it *before* the wedding, but this is no ordinary circumstance.

I mean, I know what I look like with short hair—*that's not the issue*. What I don't know is how comfortable or uncomfortable I'll feel without it, and I need to be comfortable for this wedding because it's my only brother's wedding and I'm the officiant performing the ceremony. (I even got ordained for it, meaning I can perform baptisms too, so if you ever need a dunk, you know who to call.)

So anyway, as any guy would be before a once-in-a-lifetime experience, naturally I'm nervous as fucking fuck, lol. I mean, I don't even know if I'm allowed to be on this airplane at the moment because there must be a policy against pets and I'm having kittens right now. Also, that 'lol' up there was 100 percent one of those nervous laughs you write when you're totally unsure of yourself and didn't laugh at all. By the way, I'm feeling great and super confident about performing the wedding, but yeah, this upcoming haircut has got me freaked out in all sorts of ways. Damn, I think I'm going to need to have somebody else drive me home. Are there any hair salons that offer wheelchairs,

blankets, and hot cocoa?

Okay seriously though, I guess the reason why cutting my hair is such an ordeal is because I already know it'll feel like I'm removing a big part of my current identity. If you don't think that has any validity, consider the fact that my brother's fiancée told me to keep it for the wedding because she said it's the only way she feels she really knows me and therefore she'll be more comfortable on her big day if I don't cut it. (Obviously that's a total non-factor to her considering the things she'll be busy with, but every little bit helps *and I'll take whatever I can get just don't make me do it*.)

Alright, I think now's the time to take this whole identity thing and loop it back around to connect it with the stuff about how we're more comfortable with people in the ways we already know them, including our own selves. And whether we care to admit it or not, how we think about our own identities has a lot to do with our appearance, and vice versa.

The thing that's so strange about the interconnectedness of those things is that identity is mostly internal and exclusive to us whereas appearance is mostly external and exclusive to others (so they're kind of disconnected at the same time). Like, we literally can't even see our own faces in real life with our eyes the way other people see them, since all we ever see are reflections, photographs, and those super flattering low-angle live shots of our chins when we open our phone's front-facing camera by accident. It kind of reminds me of how the Earth only ever sees the same exact face of the moon because the rotations and revolutions line up perfectly to prevent us from seeing any other view of it. There really *could* be cheese on the other side if NASA has been lying to us this whole time. Now that's a conspiracy theory documentary lineup I'd watch: *A Cheese Worth Lying For, Space Nachos, Forbidden Fromage,* and of course, *Planet Queso.*

Anyway, back to my hair (since it's been forever, I know). It's weird how

altering something that I won't even be able to see without the help of a mirror can make such a difference. I'm so used to my long hair being a part of me by now that getting rid of it is going to come with a lot of changes to what used to be fixed variables; there goes my most obvious distinguishing factor that I could also run my hand through, there goes everyone else's low-hanging fruit when it comes to conversation starters, and there goes all the times of people calling me Jon Snow or Jesus. What am I going to do from now on, use my lack of charisma to garner attention? That's not salvageable.

I mean, it's always been easy for people to point me out at any time:

"Hey I'm looking for Ian, do you know him?"

"Oh sure, he's over there. The guy with the long hair."

Yeah, that's about as gone as the wind that used to blow my hair, so what's it going to be now instead?

"Oh sure, he's over there. The guy with the abrasive personality."

At least in this case they'll be charged to talk with a few people in the crowd before hearing five words out of my mouth and yelling Bingo.

I'm not gonna say this is about whether or not I'll still have the mojo to chat up women without it, because it's not. It's also not *not* about that. Either way it's just time to cut it, and I'll miss being able to do a perfectly timed hairflip to Snoop Dogg's lyrics in The Next Episode when he says, *"Bitches lookin' at me strange but you know I don't care, step up in this motherf-- just a-swangin' my*

hair." If it's any consolation, I won't miss being salty about errant man-bun remarks, since mine was a real bun long before that stupid top-knot with shaved sides look became trendy.

Honestly, I'm just happy to be able to acknowledge that I've made an embarrassingly big deal over a haircut, and I feel pretty good to be channeling my true uneasiness ahead of performing my brother's wedding ceremony into a topic so superficial that I was compelled to preface it with an elaborate ruse. The truth is, I'm just anxious about it, and I'd rather distract myself with my hair than worry about screwing up their big day. At the same time, I've been writing some beefy columns on things I felt deserved it, so it's pretty funny to me how the next one after an important sequence of worthy topics is a throwaway for all throwaways.

I also told myself that if this turns out to be anything other than the shortest of all my columns—no matter if I'd miraculously run out of things to say (*fat chance*), or if I just decided to stop—then I ought to be jettisoned from this aircraft. I'm also qualifying that statement by saying that only the 'real column' parts count.

Okay, so that's definitely enough. Getting a haircut is not a big deal, and even if I don't like going back to short hair initially, at least it'll grow on me —*HEYOOOOO!*

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I wrote this on a flight from Reykjavik to Newark, 29 May 2018.

XXX

Chapter 13: Please Hold Your Boos Until After the Plane Lands

***Picks up the phone that flight attendants use to make announcements.*

Alright thank you, thank you. Thank you so much. Wow what a great crowd, how are you? Thanks for coming out tonight. Good to see you.

It's a pleasure to be here above Atlantic City, New Jersey at 23,000 feet and climbing. We've got a long journey ahead so I've decided to adlib some in-flight entertainment for you without your consent. Besides, it's not like any of these fancy folks sitting up here in the premium rows can use the seat-back monitors in front of them anyway, since (A) the wired headsets to their shiny new phones are incompatible without 3.5mm jacks, (B) the headphones offered onboard are too cheap to produce tolerable sound, and (C) there's no wireless options yet because that would be a clusterfuck.

It *would* be pretty amazing, however, if you could cast media to those seat-back screens from your phone and just use whatever listening method you have that's already connected to your device, wouldn't it? Yeah, but that'll never happen, and you might think it's because of how quickly those expensive headrest units become technologically obsolete, but that's not it. Really it's because there's always the chance that *one guy* who thinks he's funny decides to put on some midget porn and ruin it for everybody. I'd like to point out to all passengers that the guy seated in 7B just did a suspiciously timed spit-take, so clearly *he's* the one guy who thinks that's funny. I guess you have him to thank for having to listen to me ramble for the remainder of this flight.

To be fair, at least it's just harmless midget porn and not something illegal like drugging flight attendants and commandeering the microphone. And seeing as I

don't know how long I'll be able to hold onto this microphone, I have to tell you a story my mom told me the other day about the time she found herself involved with a rapey kind of doggy three-way. *[Dude, what the fuck? Seriously?]*

Omg wait, it was *NOT* via participation. She just facilitated it. Wow, what the hell is wrong with you people? Look, my mother would never be interested in any of that ~~so clearly I get it from my dad's side of the family~~. In fact, my mom is still traumatized by the episode to this day, thank you very much, so it was very brave of her to recount the tale of what happened years and years ago when she and my father were breeding my family's female cocker spaniel for puppies a second time. Again, I've only just gotten wind of this story myself and HBO already wants the rights to it.

See, what happened was, my parents were visiting the house of a family that owned a stud cocker with the intent of inquiring about his procreative services. Apparently my dad (Adrian is his name) was upstairs chatting with the head of the household while my mom was chilling in the basement with the two pooches, when suddenly the male made an executive decision to mount our female right then and there. The problem was, this male was so much bigger than our poor little lady that she completely collapsed underneath him with her legs starfishing out in clear agony. In a panic, my mom sprang into action; however, considering both the potential missed opportunity due to our female being near the end of her estrus cycle, plus the common courtesy of not interrupting a male on the verge of getting his rocks off, she felt she had no other choice but to hold up our lady cocker for the rest of the deed while also screaming out for Adrian like Rocky after 15 rounds in the ring with Apollo Creed.

Okay, judging by most of your faces, this is going super well. Let's try this instead; who here likes dogs? Any dog people onboard? Do ya like dogs? Dogs in airports are the best, aren't they? I'm always jealous when somebody on an airplane gets randomly seated next to a dog. That's like winning the seat lottery, or landing on Boardwalk in Monopoly. I even get excited at the airport when I

see service dogs I'm not allowed to pet. You just feel proud that the dog is doing his job, right? And meanwhile you're fighting this intense urge to risk it all and pet him anyway. Wouldn't be the same with cats, though. How weird would it be for someone to be walking their cat on a leash around the airport? Like, I don't even need a 'Don't pet me' sign for that one. Don't get me wrong, cats are fine, I can handle cats, but yeah, don't sit next to me if you have one.

Maybe I've gotten a bit off track here, but if you take another peek out your window and look down, once again you'll see the gigantic ball we live on that doesn't make any sense either.

Do any of you ever get those stupidly deep and distant moments when you observe the globe from up here, like you're some low-budget existential astronaut? By a show of hands, yes? Okay, some of you are with me.

Well, the last time I did the whole 'questioning the nature of our reality while dramatically gazing at the clouds through a plane window' thing, I got pretty hung up on the fact that planets are spheres—and that's not to suggest the world is flat or anything like that, because it's definitely round. (*Yikes, I almost walked myself into that one.*)

Any flat Earth supporters on board with us today? No? Shoot, I was hoping to learn more about Bigfoot.

Did you know you can actually disprove flat Earth theories just by looking at the size of cell phones nowadays? It's true. Sorry to pick on the passengers up front again, but if half of these comfortably seated people were to put their preposterously gigantic devices on the tarmac after we land, you'd see that only the midsections of the devices would touch the ground. Seriously though, it's hard to believe society's response to phones becoming impractically large was to

start gluing goofy finger holders on the back of them just to be able to use them one-handed again. Talk about a cure being worse than the disease. Are we even trying?

Anyway, the super mind-bending, Jaden Smith-esque question I was getting at was: Why the hell are all the planets in our solar system spheres? (How profound, right?) Like, when was the last time you came across a single rock on the ground that resembled a nearly perfect-shaped ball? Okay, and did you find *eight* more with it that were just as good? (And don't try to escape the point by picking on poor Pluto; there's still seven more planets, and some of them have magic rings made of watery ice-rocks inexplicably floating around them. I bet none of those are anywhere close to being perfect spheres either.)

So now what? Maybe you're going to point out that all the planets are spheroids simply because of how gravity works. *Sorry for my language to the kids who are actually listening, but are you fucking crazy?* Gravity is an even more far-fetched concept than the spheres were. It's like, you're telling me, in a world with a liveable environment, that there also exists a permanent sucking force which we don't really notice until we take drastic measures to feel it, and it also conveniently doesn't suck too hard to kill us? *Pssh,* I don't care how big of an imagination you have, there's no way anybody could come up with that shit. It also becomes kind of tautological as soon as we hit the closed loop of 'planets are spheres because of gravity' and 'gravity works because planets are spheres' (i.e. for gravity to work as a uniform pulling force towards a 3D center it must be at the core of a sphere), right? So something's gotta give in order to explain both of them, doesn't it? Sounds like a cold hard case of parallel construction to me.

Okay, naturally this is trending towards a theory of origin, but I'm gonna go ahead and sidestep that entirely. Too many worms in that can. The fact of the matter is, if the captain suddenly interrupted me (*rude*) to announce that we were going to crash because the wings have fallen off (*fine)*, your two best available options are either to pray to the god of your understanding that we'll survive, or to whip out your genitals real quick and try to get your rocks off one last time

(so you can at least go down swinging). Both are good bets, and if you're really savvy I reckon you could even try them simultaneously.

The fun part about the god of your understanding is that the god of your understanding exists whether you believe in a god or not. That is to say, in order to believe or not believe in a god, it requires you to have some type of conception of whatever that god is that you're believing or not believing in; it could be a firm depiction similar to the god referenced in pop culture, or it could be some type of abstraction that you're not even sure about—just anything that's not nothing, really. Overall it's a cheap trick that throws everyone (except for those pesky nihilists) in the same bucket regardless of interpretation and/or belief.

At the end of the day, we don't really know what's real and we may never be able to anyway, but we at least want to agree that there's a reality in the first place. That's why we're prone to like it when Rene Descartes' rationalism gives us a way out of our doubts with his famous a priori dictum, "*cogito ergo sum*," as well as Dumbledore's more modern rendition when Harry Potter asks him if their meeting at King's Cross is real or just happening inside his head, and he responds, "*Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?*"

So whether the god of your understanding is merely a non-existing distraction due to a fortuitous accident, or an all-knowing and ever-loving designer, or a very real and very big flying spaghetti monster, it just goes to show that in any case, each extreme independently suggests that there are probably things about our perceived reality that we're just not capable of wrapping our heads around as humans—and they're much more complex than how to avoid falling off giant gravity balls, mind you.

The thing is, my fellow passengers, even if we were to remove the god element from the equation altogether, we'd still be sputtering along with our debate of

the world's origin because of our fatuous presupposition that the realm of human understanding has no limit—which is so unrealistic. I mean, a dog's brain can't even grasp that his master has to leave for work in order to buy food, yet we somehow think it's reasonable to expect our brains to be able to grasp the inception of the whole fucking universe? That chance is so fat, its gravity could pull poor Pluto out of orbit.

Surely it's a given that being curious enough to seek out the truth is a good thing, but it's also not a cop out to accept our limitations, especially if our brains are only slightly less puny than those of dogs which we share roughly 85% of our DNA with (and slightly more sometimes if you know what I mean). [*Dude, no. Just stop.*]

Sure, people are a quantum leap above dogs in the sense that we're capable of considering our own mental limits, but we still aren't fully capable of knowing them all the time. (Case in point: me at my office Christmas party last year when I somehow broke the bathroom mirror by crashing it onto the floor. Although we can assume what went down in there, nobody including me knows how it really happened.)

But even when we're not blacked out on vodka that the girl from the Baltics was pushing on everybody at the exact same time that I was losing a card game of Fuck the Dealer really badly, do you know how hard it is to know anything at all? Like, to know something and know that we know it?

Even when it's right there in front of us we don't get it half the time. Remember the hit song *It Wasn't Me* by Shaggy and how everyone thought that it really *was* Shaggy when it clearly wasn't? I mean, the infidelity in the shower and on the sofa and on camera certainly *did* happen, but Shaggy himself never even claims that it was or wasn't him throughout the entire song—the guy who sings the famous chorus was some dude named Rikrok, and Shaggy was just mumble rapping Jamaican English in the accompanying verses the whole time. That

misunderstanding probably led Rikrok to get away with it, but we never heard much from him afterwards. So maybe he did or maybe he didn't, but we can't know for sure because, *again*, it's so hard to *know* we know something, and that's the real enigma here.

Okay, is there anyone on board who can tell me what epistemology is? What row is that, seven? You, ma'am. Go ahead. (etc...) Yeah, that's basically right, the study of knowledge and knowledge theories. Thanks.

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that covers the conundrum of how we can be sure of our own knowledge, and one of its landmarks is this cutesy little case called the Gettier Problem. In general, knowledge usually gets defined as 'true justified belief,' meaning a person can know something if and only if it's both true *and* they have a valid reason for believing it (rather than believing in a lucky guess that also happens to be true).

A modern day counterexample from Edmund Gettier would go like this: Imagine you've just shown up late to an Airbnb for a bachelor party weekend. The rest of the group has already arrived and left for lunch, but you find a way inside the house because the back door was accidentally left unlocked by one of the boys. You put your bag down and go have a tinkle. Upon entering the bathroom you lift up the lid only to find a Smirnoff Ice in the toilet bowl or perhaps in the tank interfering with the float and refill tube, either of which was left for the bachelor to find and ultimately have to drink while down on one knee per tradition. (Side note: I can't believe Icing is still a thing. That's coming from a guy who is definitely a dead horse ~~fucker~~ beater, so it's odd that I've cooled on the Icing charade, no pun intended.)

Now, you may be a coward in this scenario but you've also got integrity, and rules are rules so you reach in there and pop open that bad boy and chug it. You're also not very creative in this scenario, so you clearly brought some Smirnoff Ices to hide for the bachelor as well (you dweeb). Thus, you decide to

replace the one that you drank, and then you grab your bag and head out to go meet up with the boys, locking the back door on your way out.

When you arrive, you don't mention anything because the bachelor is there and you can't spoil the not-so-surprising surprise in front of him.

At this point, isn't it a bit tricky that all the boys who knew about the original Ice still *know* that there's an Ice waiting in the toilet? Like, their belief that the toilet has an Ice is true, and they're also extremely justified to believe it's true because they all witnessed the first guy put it there, and there's virtually no reason for it to have been removed.

But isn't their true and justified belief founded on a bit of luck that you happened to have brought a replacement Ice? Should true and justified belief in this case really be considered as *knowledge* when chance played a role? Who thinks yes or no? Probably not, right?

At the very least, this example represents a strong case against the common conception of what knowledge is, and I think my favorite part about all of this is that Gettier's original paper on it was only three pages long and he never published anything again. No follow-ups, no unrelated pieces, nothing at all. What an ace.

Okay, moving on. Besides the things we claim to know we know (which two-time US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously called the *known knowns*), there's also some options that include the unknown. Altogether we have to consider: things we know we know, things we know we don't know, things we don't know we know, and things we don't know we don't know.

If you're like Rumsfeld, you might think that the most difficult and/or frightening category on that list must be the unknown unknowns, or the things we don't know we don't know. *But I say fuck that*. Why should things we don't know bother us? It's the things we know we don't know that should scare us shitless because those are our limitations being rubbed in our faces for things we can't understand—like how there's a one in 64 billion chance that your fingerprint matches someone else's. (Seriously, if fingerprints don't blow your mind you are a fucking moron. *Again, sorry kids*.) Or, what about how 90 percent of all the weird-ass US news stories come from the state of Florida. Is anyone here from Florida? Yes? So you know what I'm talking about, right? See, totally legit. I'm not making this up.

I mean, we kinda do know that freedom of information laws in Florida make it easier for journalists to obtain police reports (so that could explain a disproportionate volume of articles), and maybe we do recognize how it's a little clickbaity that all the headlines use the same template of '*Florida Man does xyz...*' to create the familiarized meme-like narrative of Florida Man as America's worst superhero, but all of that still has no effect on the ridiculous nature of the stories themselves.

Take, for example, this headline: "*Florida man with 'Do Not Resuscitate' tattoo collapses, doctors don't know what to do*."

That was a *real* story, and the man also had his own signature tattooed and underlined beneath the DNR message. Total double whammy, right? Not only is that an outrageous predicament, but it's also super relevant because the doctors *knew* that they *didn't know* something. I'm super spooked about it because my driver's license is from Florida, so I could easily end up in one of those headlines someday—especially because those crazy stories never seem to happen to the other main Floridian demographics (aka older people, tourists, southern immigrants, and northern snowbirds), so all that's left is me and the swamp people.

But shit, there's lifetimes of things most of us know we don't know merely because we don't care to comprehend them despite knowing for a fact that we're capable of it. For example, besides the captain and crew, not one of us has any idea how this plane really works. Sure, the core concepts of physics and airplane anatomy are there, but if this big metal bird crashed in a water landing and all 245 other passengers and I swam to an island chock-full of all the necessary tools and resources to make a new one, *except* for the internet and books, how many years would it take our dumb asses to build literally anything from scratch that could fly with passengers on it, even with prior knowledge that the technology were possible?

I don't know man. Even though we *have* figured out a lot of stuff so far, it's crazy to think about how our entire history has been made up of trying to understand our planet and our reality—but honestly we're just awful at it and most of the time we fight amongst ourselves anyway, because some of us are willing to say that climate change is a hoax in exchange for the right amount of money. *Any takers in the front row? I'll start the bid at five dollars.*

Still, our failing to understand our planet and our reality (while simultaneously feeling the need to) must be why it takes so long for humans to develop compared to pretty much any other animal. What other species has babies that are more helpless than ours? Giraffes can stand on their own just minutes after being born. Baby camels can walk within an hour of birth and get back to the herd in just two weeks, yet we claim to be the master species? We spend ten years figuring out how our bodies work, how to talk, and how to interact with each other, and then we pack on another eight years learning about the history of what the rest of our species has already done or started to figure out or fucked up.

Can you imagine if human babies could hold their own alongside adults within two weeks, or if we were fully grown at two years old like dogs? Imagine if you were at a bar and saw a woman approach a young man to ask how old he was, and he was like, *"Uhh I'm two."* Wouldn't that be ~~so hot~~ terrible? Yes it would

be; he was supposed to say "24 months" since that's the rule on how to say baby ages.

By a show of hands, how many of you have a niece or a nephew? Yeah, cool, cool. So my sister just had a baby boy a month ago, making me an uncle for the first time. (*For fuck's sake, I am not about to be making any creepy uncle jokes, so don't put that evil on me. I'm going to be an outstanding uncle.*)

Anyway, I think it would be fun to get into full-blown arguments with my nephew if he were fully developed at two years old instead of a complete idiot that would accidentally die if left alone for eleven minutes. Fortunately he's a more-than-Gerber-cute baby, so nobody can take their eyes off him, that handsome devil.

I see a few babies on the plane here, congrats to the parents. I'd call for a round of applause, but white people get made fun of for clapping at stuff.

What do you guys think about baby names? Baby names are interesting, right? Do you think they're getting too weird, are we overthinking them, does it matter? The ancient Egyptians were serious about names. Like, they believed if you knew the name of somebody or something, that you had power over it. And you know, I had this genius idea before my nephew was born where I was going to send my sister and her husband a text every day for about one hundred days, saying something like "I can't wait for baby Arnold to arrive," and, "I'm so excited for baby Gene!" After about 100 days of different names, I'd either have named my sister's baby, or executed the power of 100 name vetoes. Luckily I didn't go through with it.

By the way, if anyone does that to me—which, first of all, would be so proactively evil, and second of all, it assumes I'd be lucky enough to have a

child—I swear I'll clap back with even better revenge. That's right, I'm going to teach your kids how to ride a bicycle before they're ready and tell them that I'm doing it because "Your parents don't have time for you," thus creating a dark, disturbing hole in their childhood.

Speaking of dark and disturbing holes [*Not again, dude*], I think we need to do another course correction here, so let's turn to things we know that we know. [*Oh good*.]

We certainly take many things we've already come to know (i.e., what our predecessors have already figured out) for granted when it comes to their complexity. Sometimes the simpler you make things, the more unbelievable they seem to be. For example, if it were up to primitive people to have collaborated on making the first human, just the concept of having skin that constantly renews itself as a natural self-healing property is something we never would've considered—that is, not with our shitty intelligence. It would've been like, "Alright bitches, the first human is ready. Time to deploy it. Go!"

Five minutes later…

"Umm sir, he fell and scraped his knee, he's currently bleeding out and probably going to die. What do we do?"

"*Sheeiiiiiit.* Can we have a do-over?"

I guess we tend to think that there's only so much room in our heads, and we learn to decide what's worth remembering without realizing it. And if we *were* capable of learning a great deal more than what we assume is our mental limit,

we'd probably have known the captain was lying about the wings falling off earlier. (That's because it's virtually impossible from a structural and physical standpoint, since there's strong as hell metal spars that run from the wing box on the bottom of the fuselage all the way through the wings.) Instead, now that guy sitting in 7B and I have to go register as sex offenders. *Oh, 7B, you're already registered? Well then, let's exchange ~~hard drives~~ phone numbers after we land so I can get some pointers.*

The thing is, despite not being capable of understanding some parts of our reality, we're also unwilling to accept that they can't be simplified from the beginning. That's probably why it's so easy for us to have boiled down our universe's creation to being a dichotomy of either one gigantic awesome accident or one gigantic master plan. In both cases, if a coincidence is that large and/or a higher power is that powerful, aren't they both definitively outside our realm of understanding anyway?

Let's not get the idea that I'm advocating one over the other, because both end up having a lot of consistency for seemingly no reason at all. Why, for example, when it comes to the god of pop culture's understanding, does god always come across as being fully omnipotent and all-seeing? Why does he get so much credit? I mean, what if this god just kinda sees our lives like the way we see our friend's lives on Instagram? Imagine if he only got little flashes every now and then and merely kept tabs on us based on what he loosely remembers.

And why do people assume that this god was finished with our universe by the time we got here? What if earth was just an unfinished project on his to-do list? Like, what if humans invented airplanes much faster than he expected us to, and then he was like, "Oh shit, I have to go make whatever the top of clouds look like now. These dicks are outstripping me."

What if the god of pop culture's understanding had a life-partner and they had conflicting interests sometimes? What if I called them Mr. and Mrs. God, and

what if you didn't care that I gave them a heterosexual and patriarchal relationship just for the sake of commonly understood conveniences? Imagine if Mr. God wanted something to happen to a guy named Ben but that was mutually impossible or incompatible with something Mrs. God wanted, so they either had to compromise or tons of people would get killed? Maybe the god of our understanding is actually a council of gods breaking eggs to make omelets. What if eggs are just failed planets that didn't turn out as perfect spheres? Look out the window and think about that for twenty minutes.

I think you get the point: when it comes to the god of your understanding, it doesn't matter what side we take because even if it were right, we'd never be able to know we know it in the first place. Nevertheless, we humans will still come up with some pretty goofy shit about our reality either way. Here's an example:

Have you ever noticed the great lengths we've gone as a society to decide that eating with our fingers is bad etiquette, because we've somehow determined that it's not very classy and we shouldn't have to stoop so low? I'm sure you've heard (or can imagine) someone saying, "Wow, use your fork. Don't be an animal."

Don't be an animal? We *are* animals. Since when did we decide to stop being animals? In the German language, speakers use two different words (*essen* and *fressen*) to distinguish between when a person is eating and when an animal is eating. Who are we trying to kid here? Are we just doing this to feel superior for no reason or are we really trying to flex on the rest of the animal kingdom? I mean, which other species could we possibly impress by giving it the impression that we're not animals? Maybe it's written in Bear Code that bears can only eat other animals.

Bear 1: "Oh look, Harold. Look at that one! Omg, look!"

Bear 2: "Pump the breaks, Barry. That there ain't an animal, you see."

Bear 1: "But... how can you tell?"

Bear 2: "Well, it's easy, innit? Doesn't eat with his fingers. That's how you know."

End scene. (I hope you liked that the bears in that story were named Harry and Barry.)

Really though, besides the fact that most animals don't even use their hands/paws/whatever to eat but instead go face first, you would think the effort we put into the preparation of our food would've already set us far enough apart. We make elaborate recipes and food and drink pairings and shit, but nope, somehow eating with our fingers negates it all. Sorry. Disqualified. You're an animal. Are we waiting for the day aliens show up all confused about which species runs the planet, just so we can be like, "Look, Mr. Spaceman, we eat our food with metal tools! Please let us into the cool part of space."

We're also the only species that intentionally does some kind of presentation of our meals. We put our food in ridiculously impractical vessels or on planks of wood that don't even resemble plates sometimes because we get bored of them, and the thing that drops us all the way back down to looking like animals is how we decide to enjoy all this effort? Bitch, not only did it take two hours to put together all this ridiculous food pageantry, but I'm also going to use a completely non-food related invention of ours called a camera to take photographs of it so I can remember what I ate on this particular meal out of the 86,000 I'll eat in my lifetime.

Speaking of meals, in a few moments they'll begin the in-flight dinner service, and you're going to choose between chicken or pasta. Then, you're going to struggle with your little plastic forks and knives on your little tray table with all the little food containers and lids. I will too because I'm not an animal for fuck's sake.

There's a lot of strange bullshit that we do to pretend we're civilized for nobody and for no reason other than to feel refined. One of my favorites is the notion of staying calm during emergencies and walking instead of running. I'm telling you right now, that's a hoax; it's a trick that the smart people came up with to keep the dumb and compliant people out of their way. They made the whole thing up, and they did it because they just wanted to feel like they knew something for once. (That also describes what I'm doing right now, since half of the logic in this set doesn't even hold up, but whatever. It's been fun.)

Okay folks, that's all the time I have. Holy shit you've been a great audience. There'll be no encore but I will leave you with the following request: For the love of the god of your understanding, if we survive this flight and I go to jail over this, please use the headline, "*Florida Man skyjacks plane to test out scatterbrained improv monologue on unsuspecting passengers, might also be a sex offender.*"

...

I wrote this on a flight from Philadelphia to Madrid, 9 June 2018.

XXX

Chapter 14: Pack Bags, Not Baggage (and Other Travel Pro Strats)

What is it about air travel that brings out the worst in people? It's like, no other form of transportation is under as much surveillance and inspection, and yet none of them seems to come close to commercial aviation in terms of how much that one stresses people out. Granted, flying *is* a lot to handle for some infrequent travelers, but on top of that we also overemphasize the monitoring of everything that *could* go wrong, and that comes with an incommensurable overreaction when practically anything does.[1] Also, the worst place you could ever poop your pants is probably on an airplane. Just saying.

I guess the collective fear of death by airplane is decent grounds for ~~shitting yourself~~ generating a high stress environment, but flying has gotten so reliable lately that even the saying *about* how you're more likely to die on the way to the airport is already played out. I mean, it's still true, but considering how last year (ATOW) was the least fatal year in aviation history, flying is even more defensible as the safest option behind staying at home—or perhaps riding in a bathtub filled with chocolate pudding that's inside of an armored car.[2]

One of the leading experts on aviation safety has historically been Dr. Arnold Barnett, a professor of statistics and management science at MIT's business school. I sifted through some of his old ~~chocolate pudding cups~~ research, and discovered that even some outdated facts and figures have stood the test of time in illustrating how sizable of a reach it is to expect anything life-threatening to happen to you in the air. In two decades of his research from the mid 70s to mid 90s, here's what still sticks out: first of all, the risk of death per flight was one in seven million. Secondly, no matter how often you flew during that span, you were roughly 20 times more likely to die when you got in a car than when you got on a plane. Lastly, if you flew every day of your life, it would take about 19 thousand years before you'd be killed in an accident, probability wise.

Now, I don't fly every single day, but I'm on the verge of reaching a hundred flights in one year,[3] so that's basically two flights per week for me. Now, considering how flying every day would've taken 19 thousand years to die in an accident back then (statistically speaking), that means today it would take me... way more than that. (*Lol, whatever.*) The point is, you're still more likely to accidentally kill yourself on the plane by doing something stupid than for the plane to kill you.

Of course, for some people, facts and figures don't matter. I mean, we all think we're special enough to win the lottery against impossible odds, so that means we're definitely special enough to go down at the first sign of turbulence too, right? That's the kind of mental gymnastics that results in needing drugs to get through the flight, or being on them already. Sounds like an infomercial; "There are some people whom statistics can satisfy. *For everyone else, there's Ambien.*"

In no way do I mean to belittle people who have a hard time flying. One of the things that goes hand in hand with becoming a more experienced traveler is the priggish urge to silently ridicule the unseasoned ones, even when whatever annoying thing they're doing is completely innocuous. I'd go as far as calling you a liar if you told me you were both a very experienced traveler and had never once scoffed at the lady who behaved like she'd never gone through airport security, or rolled your eyes when the overeager family lined up to board the plane an hour before the gate agents arrived, or cringed when people clapped after the plane landed, or sneered when the guy next to you caused a commotion getting his carry-on from the overhead by reaching over people instead of just being patient. Those on-site reactions are practically unavoidable sometimes, and any one of them could happen at any moment—just like pooping your pants. I'm still just saying.

Fortunately, all that irritating stuff does lose its intensity over time (except for the fear of soiling yourself), but the thing that never seems to dwindle is the

observably high level of stress that permeates throughout airports regardless. It usually manifests itself in the form of overblown panicking due to poor estimations of time, generic fight-or-flight insecurities (*pun somewhat intended*), and/or a constant need for reassurance that we're not fucking up in some way that'll make us miss our flight—and this goes for both regular and non-regular travelers alike.

But if flying is so safe and reliable, why does it come with so much drama?

Well, at the end of the day, whether it's being nervous about missing a flight or just feeling irrationally irked by people who don't know what they're doing in very loud ways, air travel nearly always seems to be a big deal because airports are one of the few places in the world where every single person feels like the most important person there, and that everybody else is simply an obstacle slowing them down. (Other examples include banks, post offices, and the DMV.) But airports are unique in that, on top of an exaggerated risk of death, there's also this amplified fear of something small going wrong to prevent *you and only you* from making it to your destination that's hundreds or even thousands of miles away after what probably required a lot of money and time planning and can't easily be replaced without a lot more of both. At the same time, nobody at an airport really knows anyone else, so everybody is pretty much only looking out for themselves, and there's virtually no reward for being unselfish. What we're left with is basically an all-or-nothing, reverse Hunger Games free-for-all situation where everybody thinks and acts as if they're going to die *but nobody ever does.*

Personally, I wouldn't say people are actively out to get each other as a result of all this, but one of the side effects is certainly a heightened obliviousness when it comes to things like personal space and property. One particularly infuriating example for me was in the security queue at Berlin's Schönefeld Airport when a woman was doing the classic worthless move where every time the line advanced two feet, she'd close the gap as fast as she could as if that would get her to the front sooner. That's usually pretty harmless, but what tested my

patience was that literally every time the line moved, she was such an eager beaver that she'd bump into my backpack from behind me. It happened so many times that I began counting.

When I had finally reached my wit's end, instead of internally raging like I'd done in pretty much every prior instance, all my experience paid off because this time I thought better and just asked her to get in front of me. *Problem solved.* The funny thing is, I was so ready for her to ask me why I let her pass that I had been silently rehearsing how to say "Because you've touched my backpack 14 times already" in German—but of course she never cared to. Instead, she just plowed on through because who gives a shit about what's going on with somebody else when it's every man for himself in this rat race?

Another noteworthy incident happened to me one time in Paris, when I had just put my bags through the security checkpoint and reached the other side to find a man erratically moving my stuff out of my tray and consolidating it in another so as to clear up space for him to do whatever he was doing with his own belongings. I don't remember what I said verbatim to the guy, but here's what I said in a voice note to my buddy when I retold the story:

"So I get to security and some guy just starts fucking with my shit in my tray. Like, another passenger is touching my stuff in my tray. So I turn to this guy and say 'Hey, can you have some respect for my things please? Like, don't touch my shit, alright?' And he pretends like he doesn't understand me and says, 'Where are you from?' (*as if that mattered*)."

[Naturally I'm hashtag triggered at this point.]

"So he just continues to pretend he doesn't speak English, and then I kind of remember… you know… my whole thing about how this guy must think that

he's just the most important person here, and whatever. So I turn to him and smile, and then he starts talking about Bob Dylan for some reason, and then about how he's going to Tel Aviv—and we ended up having a nice conversation (*in perfect English*) about Tel Aviv. I don't know. It just reminded me of another thing that happens at airports."

Overall, even if I'm nowhere close to being fully immune to the airport stress by now, I'm pretty happy to have become somewhat desensitized to it because it's really nice to not be in such a rush all the time. At the very least, I do feel like I've traveled enough times by now to recognize certain exercises in futility when I see them, like how feeling more important than other people in an airport doesn't get you very far. And that's tough to admit, because you know me, I love feeling more important than other people. But I don't need to go to an airport to do that. (*I just need to wake up in the morning, right?*)

Besides, traveling is such a weird thing to feel better than other people at. It's like, *"Look at me, I'm so much better at letting someone else fly me to places that are far away."* It's like claiming to be the best at going out to eat dinner in restaurants (when clearly there's more value in being a great cook).

That said, with my hundredth flight in a year lurking in the distance, I've decided to put down my Big Gulp-sized portion of smug soup and try a little nibble of humble pie by giving away some of what I've learned from them so far. (*But only for a minute, though, just in case it creates a glitch in the matrix that causes interference with the pilot's instrument panel and leads to a crash. I don't want to be a statistic, you know?*)

And honestly, I think I ought to be writing about traveling related topics a lot more often anyway, and since I'm a benevolent boy I figure I'll spill the beans on whatever I've come across that helps simplify the things about traveling that we usually overcomplicate.

I wouldn't consider this an exhaustive list, but it's as much stuff as I can think of that makes traveling easier and less stressful.

…

First and foremost, there's nothing better than slashing a whole three seconds off your day by standing up exactly when the plane arrives at the gate so you can wait awkwardly for the next ten minutes just to deplane ahead of five other people in your immediate vicinity. (Lol, no. Please don't do that. And if your excuse was that you needed to stretch your legs, fine, but I'd still question why you didn't get up to do so at any point during the flight.)

The real first tip is to relax and remember this: *You're getting on the plane, they're not going to forget you, the other passengers aren't going to stop you from boarding, and they sure as hell will not stop you from getting off after landing.*

Second, you're definitely going to die someday, but that day will almost certainly not be today no matter how bumpy it gets. Look, if my own life were worthy enough to have an insurance policy, I'd voluntarily give up rights (both mine and my beneficiary's) to any compensation from flying related accidents insofar as I was not the one piloting the aircraft.[4]

Speaking of cashing in, let's get to buying those cheap flights. Right off the bat, my best tip is to do what you can to make your travel dates flexible. If you can do that, then you don't have to get lost in the sauce over how it's supposedly more expensive to fly on a Sunday, or how it's definitely more expensive to fly around the holidays. None of that shit matters if you can ~~quit your job~~ flex your

travel dates to take the cheapest viable option anyway. I'm not going to go so far as to say make your destinations flexible as well, because in that case just join one of those newsletters with the friendly white guy names that alert you when there's ridiculous one-off deals and have at it. (What is it, Zach's cheapo flights?)

Regarding *when* to buy flights, I also don't put too much stock into which day of the week to book. There are people who swear by Tuesdays because of certain behind-the-curtain promotions ending on Wednesdays or whatever, and there are people who swear against buying on Fridays because of business travelers driving up prices by making their bookings at the end of the work week. What's important to me instead is to set a proper buying window and then check on it a few times leading up to the last day you might want to book. When the window arrives, check every couple of days and then pull the trigger on something you like, keeping in mind that you can probably put a hold on a particular ticket price depending on the airline, or even just book one and refund it in 24 hours if you see a price drop. Your mileage may vary here, so remember to check the individual policies.

For big important intercontinental trips that I can't possibly miss, my buying window for lowest fares is usually around 50-60 days before the flight, and that's due to personal experience, raw habit, and what all the published research hoopla suggests anyway. For more spur of the moment travel, I'm generally willing to wait until the last minute as long as I'm ambivalent towards whether or not the trip ends up happening. Personally, I'm totally okay getting priced out of making a booking (especially when I'm traveling alone), and overall I'd say most people buy their flights too soon. I'd say half of the time it's because of how much they've hyped up a future trip and feel pressured to lock it down in advance, and the other half just comes down to being trigger happy while also lacking information.

With that in mind, a really useful tool *strictly* for gathering information ahead of making a booking is Skyscanner; it's a total piece of shit for actually buying

your flights (because it usually has inaccurate final prices that throw you for a loop), but in terms of its ability to show you all possible itineraries at a very fast rate it's top notch. I mostly use Skyscanner to estimate my booking window for trips because it has the ability to show you daily flight prices months at a time, which you can use to play around with and gauge how far in advance your intended itinerary usually has the cheapest fares. Alternatively, I also like it for generating ideas on wherever I'm traveling to next because of the 'Everywhere' search you can use to pick a date and starting location (including whole countries) and it'll pump out a ton of places you can go, sorted by price.[5]

Skyscanner also likes to include scammy travel agency websites in its database, so watch out for those. And speaking of scams, people need to stop losing sleep over the cookies thing, where they think that the price is magically changing because they aren't searching for flights in a private browser. If that happens to you, you're probably dilly-dallying too much and it probably thinks you've got the ticket in the virtual cart or whatever so it blocks it off for a certain time. The real dark pattern here is how some websites will straight up A/B test different prices for different web sessions, and that's just poor sportsmanship. Also, the "amount of people viewing this itinerary (or hotel property)" thing is totally bogus; that kind of website feature falls under what are called "Dark Patterns," and there's an entire website dedicated to documenting them if you're interested. It's kinda like how half of those public Wi-Fis that make you accept their terms before continuing will dress up their email/newsletter sign-up boxes to look mandatory as well, only more sinister.

Anyway, after you've figured out your parameters, it's time to call up Bob Barker and find the right price. Without a doubt, the real Plinko-level MVP for this is ITA Software's matrix airfare search—or at least it used to be. (The same can be said for Bing Travel's flight price predictor, which got shut down because it was too amazing.) Developed in 1996 by two artificial intelligence lab guys at MIT (*again, huh*), the ITA flight search engine is arguably the most efficient, versatile, and useful tool for finding cheap fares because it pulls all the metadata from most airlines and gives you plenty of advanced options when it comes to making a search. The UI is pretty ugly, but I'm not too concerned with frills if this bad boy can let me perform what feels like an unrestricted database search

for fares of open-jaw flights for up to five cities at each point across dates that can be searched and sorted by 1 to 5-day windows, entire months, or just total trip length.

The matrix search got so good that Google already bought it like 8 years ago (ATOW) for $700 Million USD so it could use its technology for Google Flights, which was basically an extremely restricted, yet more aesthetically pleasing version. What I'm not so sure about nowadays is whether or not Google decided to Nerf the platform in version 3.0 (the current one) to make it not as good, because it definitely started to run out of gas on me and timeout frequently within the last few years. Originally, when Google made the acquisition, the Department of Justice mandated that it had to let other sites license the software for five years. Now that those years are over and it doesn't affect anyone else, I'm suspicious of Google holding something back in order to give Google Flights an edge. (They already shut down ITA's mobile app called OnTheFly at the end of 2017 for no apparent reason, and I think they removed some search capabilities that once allowed for differing multinational origins and destinations, too.)

Besides those concerns, the matrix also only includes airlines that use Global Distribution System, which is basically what allows a booking site to have real-time access to a carrier's reservation system/database, so you'll need to search the proprietary sites for carriers like Southwest and easyJet to complete your price search (or just use Kayak or whatever to mop up the rest all at once).

Alas, merely planning a trip won't get you anywhere unless you book it.[6] That said, I don't have any particular third-party booking site to recommend versus the airline's own site (so long as you're getting the best price), and you might have a credit card that gives you extra miles or other kickbacks if you book in some special way anyway. It would've been dope if the ITA Software allowed you to purchase your flight reservations on the site directly, but it doesn't. However, Bookwithmatrix is a good and hilariously idiot-proof solution for that, where you just copy and paste the entire browser window of your selected

itinerary from the search results.

Another thing to keep in mind is that booking on an airline's proprietary site is often the only way to get specific baggage add-ons that they'll only nickel and dime you for ahead of time but quarter and dollar you for once you're at the airport. On that note, if you're doing the super budget airlines, whatever you do, just read their rules and play by them; otherwise you can expect to get burned if you play with fire aka Ryanair, because that company does not give a pun intended flying fuck about customer service and/or satisfaction. *Them flights be cheap though.*

Alright, now that we've got the aerial logistics part out of the way, that leaves the part about ~~changing your underwear~~ actually spending time at your destination and figuring out what to do there. One of my first moves I recommend is to dip your pen right back into the Google ink and open up Google Trips. It's already pretty tough to fathom using any maps application other than Google Maps, so Google Trips' integrated way of suggesting activities and attractions that you can directly star and label on your regular maps app is super useful. Seeing all those marked locations in one place is also really helpful for triangulating where to stay in a given city, and it pairs nicely if you remember to label all your favorite places and restaurants in case you visit again sometime.

[Update: Google Trips may no longer be a thing, or it might be Google Travel now.]

Another way to figure out which neighborhoods you might want to stay in is by looking up hostels because they tend to cluster around prime locations. Regarding hostels, I only have four things to say:

1. They are a necessary evil if you're a baller on a budget like me.
2. Swearing that you'll never stay in one again never fucking works.
3. It's always worth it to pay a few extra bucks to avoid the cheapest room because of the added chance that the marginally pricier room won't even be full, meaning shenanigans are less likely.
4. Don't rule out that an overnight bus is essentially a hostel on wheels, especially if it means you won't have to pay an extra night in Munich during Oktoberfest, for example. (This is the most masterful plan of all-time, btw, except for when you're actually on the bus itself. Then it's the worst.)

Visiting new places can be stressful if you have no idea what you're doing. Luckily, WikiTravel is your fairy godmother and she's got some huge ~~tits~~ tips. Seriously though, this website has pretty much all the frequently asked questions covered for every city, but without the fluffy personal blog bullshit like you get from online cooking recipes. For me, I usually care about what the main sights and neighborhoods are like, what local delicacies and traditional dishes I should eat, and most helpful of all, public transport info for getting around (as well as what your options and prices are for getting to and from the airport). WikiTravel would be easily worth it as a monthly subscription service, it's that good.

Similarly, for all your cellular phone needs in pretty much every country, there's a wiki called Prepaid Data SIM Card Wiki that keeps up-to-date info on prices, data rates, activation procedures, and where to pick up SIM cards (oftentimes with city and/or airport specific information). This bad boy helped me save a ton of cash by leading me to use an Italian SIM for a huge part of this past year instead of a more expensive German one, simply because it was cheaper and worked the same way in the EU.

Okay, it's time for the final boss, aka the airport. Taking down this beast requires a series of shrewd stratagems against whatever you individually find to be stressful, but in the end it's all about doing the little things to gain a competitive mental edge and an upbeat attitude. For example, if you're just

arriving at the airport to complete a round-trip, the difference between getting straight on the bus/train to return home and watching it drive off without you while you were waiting in the long stupid ticket line, is having already bought your ticket before the initial outbound flight. The difference between those two outcomes after a long day of traveling feels like night and day.

Like I said before, the predominant attitude of people in airports is that everyone else is in their way. Given that assumption, most people are already resigned to it and just get in line indignantly like everybody else. But not you, you're going to use it to your advantage. So when you get through the very first ID check before security in many airports, you're going to ignore the big cluster at the nearest security lane and instead go to the ones off to the side or back that probably moves twice as fast.

As a general rule, people in large groups almost always take the first option presented to them because of inattentiveness, laziness, or mindless compliance. (Remember in Men in Black when Tommy Lee Jones says, "A person is smart, people are dumb" to Will Smith?) This is why open seating music concerts with side entrances always get bunched on one side, but if you just go around you can get way closer to the stage. This is also why subway cars are always packed at the doors but have tons of room in the middle—because people get on and say, "Oh, gee this thing is packed," and they think the little space they have in front of them is the best they're gonna get.

When it comes to lines at airports, people are just too afraid to gamble with another line lest they have to come back to their original line in a worse position than before (as if a two-minute mishap would cause them to miss their flight). Still, you can't win unless you play the game, and *that's* why when you go skiing, for example, you check the closest parking lot even if it looks packed instead of immediately settling for Lot F like a coward. Security lines are no different, it's just that these feel even worse than picking the slowest checkout aisle at the grocery store even after you spent two minutes deliberating.[7] But rest assured, even if it ends up being slower every once in a while, it's always

the right call to go against the mob mentality.

Unfortunately, sometimes the mob wins and the resulting collective stupidity is unbreachable. Case in point: how everyone stands *way too close* to the belt at baggage claim. It makes absolutely no sense to wait that close, because it's literally the only way that nobody can get a bag without someone else being in the way. There's even a line on the floor that suggests how far back you should stand for optimal space to see your bags and collect them.

Then again, the notion of *you* being able to get *your* bag could never be relevant for anyone else to consider because everyone else is the most important person there (and your bag is not *their* bag). I guess in this case my suggestion is either to be the change you want to see in the world, or just passive-aggressively whack them quote-unquote "unintentionally" with the corner of your luggage while they stand there in the way even after you said "Excuse me" twice. *I hope you packed a knee brace sir, because I packed cinder blocks.*

Obviously it's also a no-brainer to avoid checking your bags if you don't have to. In that regard, although you're going to want a hard case style for any bag you check, duffel bags are resoundingly better than roller bag carry-ons because they almost never get checked at the gate. Sometimes in Europe, even if your duffel gets tagged at the gate, you're still able to walk freely past the baggage cart on the tarmac and none of the bag dudes will stop you because they're all focused on the wheeled roller bags rumbling on the ground anyway. Duffels can usually fit more stuff as well, and they rarely have any problems squeezing in the overhead compartments. It's also nice that you're forced to carry your duffel with you everywhere because that'll compensate for the missing exercise you pretended you were going to do on your trip when you packed your workout clothes. (You know *exactly* what I'm talking about, don't you?)

As for packing your bags, I've only got a couple main rules for efficiency that depend on what you think you're going to be doing at your destination. The key

trick is to pack pants and shoes based on a minimum projection of planned activity changes, and pack socks and underwear based on an aggressive projection of ~~shitting yourself~~ activity changes. I also like to bring a small drawstring bag in my carry-on that I fill up with whatever snacks, electronics, and toiletries I might want handy for the flight instead of opening the overhead a bunch of times or having to keep track of everything in the seat back pocket.

Speaking of seats, I'm a window seat kind of guy, and I'm also an 'I don't want to pay extra to reserve a seat' kind of guy. Instead, I get off on trying to beat the system as best I can with tiny victories. For example, on certain budget airlines that really nickel and dime you, wait until the last minute to do your check-in because that gives you a chance to get automatically allocated into a great seat that they weren't able to upsell at the time the sales stopped. (Oh and when it comes to flying Southwest in the States and how to game the check-in system for a good boarding position, I have no clue. Everyone says to just check in the moment you hit 24 hours before the flight exactly, but whatever, it's a roll of the dice. The real hack comes when you're getting on the damn plane anyway.)

Before going any further, here's an underrated tip: no matter what airline you're on, just board during your actual group and/or position. There's no need to be a dick, just accept the hand you're dealt. Say it again with me: *I'm getting on the plane, they're not going to forget me, the other passengers aren't going to stop me from boarding, and they sure as hell will not stop me from getting off after landing.*

I've previously mentioned that I have an uncanny ability to get my own row. The secret to being the James Bond of getting your own row is actually quite simple. You just have to put in ~~a little bit~~ way more effort than everyone else and game theory the ever-living shit out of it; if you can upgrade your odds from 'no chance at all' to 'a slight chance,' sometimes a little bit of finesse is all you need.

Study the seating chart, weigh your available options, check the kiosk the

moment you get to the airport (even if you already have an electronic boarding pass on your phone), check the mini-monitors after security that some airlines have to advertise upgrades but also do seat changes, talk to the agents if you're actually that desperate, and when you have the chance to give up your preferred seat that already has occupants next to it in exchange for the open row in the middle of the plane that may or may not fill up depending on if it's a full flight or not, you need to make that call yourself. (Just know that people have a subconscious, layered preference to select their preferred type of seat on the sides rather than in the middle section. It's another mob mentality move where the center has a bad reputation or whatever, so people tend to think the sides are preferable and select those first.) In the end, giving up the seat you would have liked only to move to a worse row that ends up full anyway is a big risk. It feels amazing when it pays off though.

To me, that's what traveling is about; there are certain risks that are always worth taking—but being unprepared if you poop your pants on a plane is *not* one of those risks. (*I don't know how many times I have to tell you this.*) And despite how this whole ordeal probably sounded like I was harkening back or leading up to some personal Chekhov's Shart anecdote, the truth is I have never done that. It would've made for a great story, though. Nonetheless, it's also true that there hasn't been any MIT research on my chances of doing that, so I can only assume that my probability is dangerously significant given how often I fly. Therefore, until I hear some cold hard statistics to ease the tension, I'll be in my own row, fully clenched.

…

I wrote this on flights from Lisbon to Luxembourg, Luxembourg to Berlin, and Berlin to Amsterdam, 20 June 2018, 21 June 2018, and 22 June 2018, (adding the Paris anecdote and additional details on a flight from Paris to Krakow, 25 July 2018).

XXX

1. It's kind of like how traditional combustion engine gasoline vehicles have about 55 fire incidents per billion miles traveled, compared to only five incidents per billion miles in a battery powered Tesla, but anything that goes awry in one of those ends up making blockbusting headlines, despite earning the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's top safety score of all-time for production vehicles. ↑

2. Okay, I gotta break the 4th wall here and say that I just re-read this and I have no idea how or why I thought it was funny when I initially wrote it. That is objectively not funny, but I've decided to leave it to show you what I often have to deal with when I'm proofreading my own shit. ↑

3. As of today, this flight makes 88 in the last 365 days, so all I have to do is outpace the first few months and I'll make it to 100 in a 365 day stretch. ↑

4. Famous last words? No, because I'm not famous. ↑

5. Quick note about that; if anybody wants to get filthy rich, create the opposite. It would be an absolute gamechanger to figure out what the cheapest location from which you could return to a specific destination (e.g., what city should I go to as the last stop on my trip because it'll get me home the cheapest?). There's a reason that doesn't exist but I can't remember. ↑

6. In the wise words of former NFL running back Marshawn Lynch: *"I'm just 'bout that action, boss."* ↑

7. Funny side note: I actually have a friend who did some full-fledged research on this. He's the same guy that once got shit on our carpet in Palo Alto and then proceeded to bleach the carpet in an attempt to clean it. Absolute moron, right? Although I did not help him clean up the carpet, I did help him clean up his CV and stuff ahead of his application to Amazon, where he went on to make fat stacks and basically play a key PM role in developing Alexa. Absolute non-moron, right? He probably takes more credit for that than he should, so in that case I'm doubling down and taking full credit for developing Alexa. Oh, and by the way, the answer to the grocery store checkout thing is this: it doesn't matter how many people are in front of you, or how many items they all have, the X factor is the speed of the human behind the counter. Go with the fastest human. ↑

Chapter 15: Skits-zophrenia

Isn't it a bit stupid how a tiny part of us can get upset when some art form or media that we're a big fan of suddenly becomes way too popular? (Because, you know, we were into it before it was cool, so nobody else should be allowed to like it.) And then, for whatever reason, rather than just being wholeheartedly excited for the success of a small-time band or something else we genuinely enjoy, we're instead capable of developing the ungrateful feeling that we deserve some kind of credit for the sudden rise in popularity because *we* liked it sooner, when clearly we didn't do jack shit. The answer is yes, it is stupid. I'm taking my ball and I'm going home.

For my sake, please go ahead and admit that you've done this to some extent so we can continue. It's not a terribly common experience (and I wouldn't consider the child-like response to be our prevailing attitude when cases like that happen), but I wonder why this ever comes up, because, *well*, it does.

I don't know, maybe we're afraid that we'll eventually lose enthusiasm for one of our special interests due to how the newfound popularity could cause the creator's content to shift towards whatever else is already mainstream, ultimately perverting what we originally liked about it and leaving us preemptively bitter. Or, maybe deep down we think that if something we really like goes mainstream, it means we could be losing a once-unique interest of our own and therefore be losing a unique part of ourselves. Like I said, I dunno.

For me personally (and I suppose professionally as well), I usually keep an eye and ear on the storytelling aspects of whatever media I'm consuming because that's what draws me in and keeps me interested. I don't mean to sound like an asshat in the way that came out (as if I presume to absorb content better than other people or something equally and unnecessarily pretentious), I just prefer to

pay more attention to the lyrics and to the dialogue than to the melodies and to the action because that's what I like. I think that explains why I have such a high appreciation for when particularly clever nuggets of writing make it big in pop culture as well, whether the source is super mainstream or not.

Take, for example, how Ed Sheeran wrote a half-subliminal kiss-off song about telling someone to go fuck themselves (which did *not* require censoring for the radio like Cee-Lo's *Fuck You / Forget You* obviously did), but then Sheeran decided it wasn't good enough to release on his own album, so he gave it to Justin Bieber instead, who finally ran with it (and did so well with it) until *Love Yourself* became the top performing track on the 2016 Billboard charts. I find that pretty damn impressive. (The Sheeran part. Don't get me wrong, there's a special place in my heart for the Biebs, but the impressive bit here was all on red-headed Eddy.)

Anyway, when I try to come up with particular examples of formerly under-the-radar media that I myself coveted before they went tits up in the mainstream, I guess the overprotective and/or spoiled reaction thing only comes up in special cases, like when somebody's work had a big influence on our own, or if the material just really meant a lot to us for some weird reason. I say that because one of my favorite storytellers ever is a guy named Dan Harmon, who happened to be a Marquette University journalism major that dropped out about a decade or so before I didn't (because *look at meeee*, I graduated). Harmon is known for being the creator/writer behind a once popular cult-classic television sitcom called Community, which happened to star another Marquette grad in it named Danny Pudi, who happened to win the university's very first Chris Farley scholarship about a decade or so before I didn't win it (because *look at meeee*, I blew my audition).[1]

Be that as it may, and due to the palpable synchronicity across all of those quirky connections (albeit probably more due to how purely well-written Community was in the first place), I became an extra huge fanboy of Harmon's work, including the family tree of people and content connected to him as well. Thus,

by practically keeping an eye on his every artistic move, I found myself in my room sometime later, all gassed up and alone, ready to watch the very first episode of a new animated show co-created by Harmon called *Rick and Morty* on the day it aired. Nobody else I knew had ever heard of it at the time, but boy did that change in a hurry shortly after season one ended; I'm not sure I had ever seen a piece of entertainment go from zero popularity to one hundred percent mainstream before in such spontaneously combusted fashion. And circling back to my prompt now, as the show grew and grew, it also left me with a certain ambivalence due to my stuffy position as a day one supporter (because I was either mad that the show would probably start to get worse by catering to its newfound mainstream audience, or I just wanted to feel special for liking it first).

I think there were two eventual reasons the aforementioned gain in popularity left me feeling the brunt of those effects. (Because otherwise why the fuck would I care so much about something so stupid and petty?) First, back when I was working with a YouTube channel called Wisecrack (we did a lot of film, TV, and literature analysis/review/commentary), I felt super disrespected one day when somebody stepped on my figurative toes by going behind my figurative back and writing our first Rick and Morty related episode, despite how I clearly had dibs on it as an OG fan—and everyone else seemed to be cool with this clear sign of disrespect. I can't remember if I had been particularly gruntled with those guys before this happened, but I was absolutely somewhat mildly disgruntled afterwards.[2]

Okay, so then to make matters worse, as Rick and Morty continued to blow up, the show's Internet fan base burgeoned so damn fast that the only thing it could reasonably do was turn into a circlejerk of the same jokes and gags from the show's admittedly very clever writing. The fanbase then spiraled out of control until it spewed some really stupid shit and caused toxic hate movements regarding female staff writers and riots with McDonald's workers (because of a gag in the show about a special edition sauce they once had). As a result, people who watched the show quickly developed a reputation on the internet of being pseudo-intellectual, neckbeard-having, basement-dwelling Sheldons who mistake the way in which the show depicts its main character's dickish nature as

being due to his genius intelligence and interpret it to believe that they are smarter than others as well because they themselves are dickheads to people in real life. To put it simply, the show was probably more critical of this kind of behavior than it was celebratory, and that got lost on the hive mind of the fanbase online. The internet is a weird place.

So needless to say, the perceived value in liking the show dropped faster than Bitcoin rose, which pretty much corrupted the whole thing for me—and *not* because we ought to care about people judging us based on our interests, but because it simply became a drag to talk about. I used to like talking about the show, but suddenly I felt like I couldn't share something I enjoyed anymore, and today it seems like my original mixed feelings about it going mainstream were justified (since I actually did end up losing interest, and I felt like the content itself did also change to cater to the wider audience). But whatever. Shit happens, let's move on.

What's much more interesting to me now is how another well-known branch on the Dan Harmon tree appears to be unaffected by these kinds of popularity spikes, and that branch's name is Donald Glover. *Holy shit*, that guy has the juice. He's an actor, singer, rapper, DJ, songwriter, comedian, writer, producer, and a director. And he's had wild success in *all* of those fields. I mean, people are still (ATOW) going apeshit over his *This is America* song and the music video that he dropped last month with it (addressing gun violence and racial discrimination in the States), which was released on the *same day* he hosted Saturday Night Live, which was *five days* prior to the airdate of the final episode of the second season of his Golden Globe and Emmy Award-winning show, Atlanta. Tell me this guy ain't got the Midas Touch.

I think what makes him so good, evidently, is his uncanny ability to stay ahead of the curve by playing cat and mouse; as soon as he makes it big in one dimension, he switches gears completely. First he hit it big as a writer on 30 Rock, then he switched to acting. He hit it big as an actor on Community, then he focused on rapping. He hit it big in hip-hop as Childish Gambino, then he

scored a stand-up comedy special on Netflix. And then finally, as I mentioned before, he switched to TV producer/writer/director and churned out Atlanta.

I don't know what edibles this guy is taking, but not only do they work, they've also granted him immunity to the mainstream—or at least I think so.[3] And as a matter of fact, in one episode of Community, Glover's character (Troy) is quoted saying "We've gone mainstream," to which his counterpart (Abed) played by the aforementioned Pudi says, "Initiate Protocol Omega," and they proceed to tear down the pillow fort that the entire episode was about. I'm not sure if that's where he got it, but whatever the case may be, bravo to him for nailing it across all those ~~pillows~~ pillars of entertainment. Honestly, he's like Justin Timberlake 5G LTE but instead of being a multifaceted pop icon that can dance and bring sexy back, he's a socially conscious creator who influences public opinion with his dad bod and dance moves that aren't even very good (which, oh by the way, doesn't mean shit because he just starred as heart-throbbing, motherfucking Lando in the Star Wars movie that came out last month while all his other stuff was already booming). Seriously, how do you compete against a mega-threat like that? I don't think you do.

Nevertheless, before admitting defeat and assuming there's no way to contend with this guy, there *is* one Hail Mary marketing technique that just might work, and it's called the Blue Ocean Strategy. An offensively gross oversimplification of the strategy goes like this: imagine you have a product business that can no longer successfully coexist with a similar, yet richer competitor's superior product. Instead of shutting down (at a loss) due to your inferior product's shortcomings, and instead of trying to make your product more competitive (which you probably can't because your opponent can outspend you), you wisely decide to cut out all the costs associated with the aspects at which your product fails to compete. Next, you take whatever resources you have left and focus on a new way to differentiate your business in the market by shifting your product goals to something no one else is currently doing. What you're left with, hopefully, is a new, low-cost way to defeat your competition in a race they aren't exactly running yet. In the end, if your new product succeeds in creating a new market for the same audience, you'll have created a big metaphorical ocean between your new product and your competitor's old one. If not, so what? You

were already getting crushed anyway, you friggin' goober.

One classic example of the Blue Ocean Strategy is Cirque du Soleil, which was failing in the highly expensive live animal circus market (a competitive red ocean). Of course, Cirque du Soleil changed its strategy and ultimately took off as the theatrical spectacle of human physical skill (an empty blue ocean) that it's known for today. A more modern take on the strategy would be Netflix, which (long before it was an online streaming service) redesigned movie rentals by offering the subscription mail service for DVDs. With a new model that was entirely separate from the saturated market of new releases and late fees, Netflix completely changed the movie renting industry and only has a debt of like $5-10 billion USD today, lol. They had us in the first half, not gonna lie.

Okay, so in regard to Donald Glover, since we can't beat him and we can't join him, the Blue Ocean Strategy must be the way to go, right? Right. With that in mind, there *is* one low-budget move that this guy has yet to go for (despite mentioning it in interviews), and that's to publish a book of essays.

Well, my friends, let me tell you something. As fate would have it, a book of essays is exactly what I have been working on for some time now, but I only realized it this week so please give me a while to figure out just WTF I'm actually doing. I mean, hell, all this time writing from the window seat means it was literally right there in plane [*sic*] sight for me to see and it still took 15 ~~columns~~ chapters to hit me.[4] To be fair though, I was already happy enough just to be writing consistently and sharing my column with friends again, and I guess I didn't truly know it all had a purpose until I discovered that I could hit one hundred flights in a year and that was when everything clicked. Up until this point, 100 was just a silly arbitrary number of flights, but now it's gonna be the silly arbitrary title of my book. And you know what? Fuck it. I'm doing it.

Alrighty then, so now that I've officially started, I'm also officially terribly behind. First of all, I'd like to rip off the band-aid and admit that I *cannot* and

will not be doing any kind of competing with Donald Glover. I'm not *that* obtuse. It's like, if you saw the episode of Atlanta where Glover's character tries to beat Michael Vick in a footrace for money after assuming Vick would be tired from several other races in a row (and just as the race starts, the scene jump cuts to him pouting in the car after clearly losing the race and his money), that's exactly this situation. You don't try to outrun Michael Vick, and you don't try to out-content Donald Glover. Even if he never releases a book, the sheer history of material he's put out is too much ground to make up, and I can't waste time creating tons of sketch comedy videos for YouTube now because I have to think about the kids I can't afford to have yet.

Nevertheless, before moving on from Glover, I will say one last thing. Even in *my* book the dude is clearly crushing it, and now he can add being a MacGuffin to his list of mega-threats.[5] And by the way, using a tropey storytelling device like that and then immediately pointing it out would make Dan Harmon proud. That's kind of his thing.

So with that out of the way (and with my newfound platform of a book), I can finally get started on making up for lost time. I figure I'd do that by just listing a bunch of content ideas I've previously written down that I ~~probably~~ clearly won't get around to doing because there's like a hundred of them and this is way easier. (Lol, it's been a book for no more than five minutes and I'm already the wrong kind of a sell-out. This would not make Harmon proud.)

But yeah, if anybody out there wants to bankroll me to produce these (because I'm obviously going broke spending roughly my entire monthly salary on reaching a hundred flights), here's a backlog of skits and content ideas to get the juices flowing. I also have absolutely no idea how to organize them either, so I'm sorry about that.

Note: Some of these are one-off sketches, and some are things I'd actually do in real life if 100 Flights were a traveling web series or whatever. And some are

just dumb jokes. If I had known I was doing this sooner I could've done a vlog series or something from the start, but this is already flight number 92. Anyway, here we go.

…

[*Skit*]

Okay, so there's this guy who goes clothes shopping while he's sick to his stomach, but it's not so bad at first. Then, while he's in the fitting room, all of a sudden he has to throw up, and unfortunately it happens so fast that he has no choice but to do so in his little changing booth. The employee attending the fitting rooms hears the commotion, and decides to investigate by coming over. Politely, he asks, "Everything alright in there? How did you like the shirt?" The guy then opens the curtain, makes eye contact with the employee, and together they look over his shoulder to see vomit all over everything, and when they turn back to each other, the guy deadpans and says, "I hated it."

…

[*Skit*]

A female police officer approaches the driver side of a vehicle that she just pulled over for speeding. There are two guys inside, and one of them does not have a way with words.

Cop: "Do you know how fast you were going?"

Driver: "No I don't, I'm sorry office-ma'am."

Cop: "What did you call me?"

Driver: "Office ma'am."

Passenger: (*Whispering*) "Bro, it's officer."

Driver: (*Whispering back*) "Wait, what? She's a dude?!"

Driver: (*Turns to the cop*) "Anyway, look lady…or man…I mean office-sir… how was I supposed to know the gender you identify as? Like, shouldn't I be given the benefit of the doubt here?"

Cop: "Yes of course you should. But I'm still writing you a ticket."

Driver: "Sheeeeeiiit."

Cop: "Come again?"

Driver: "Oh, I mean 'he'-eeeeiiit."

…

[*Real-life sketch*]

Imagine I'm walking around Helsinki with a camera crew in the summertime. We wander around looking for restaurants that have outside seating. When we find one, I go up to whichever tables appear to have people from Finland sitting down eating, and I ask them, "Hey are you finished?" Then, if any of them responds with an affirmative, "Yes, I'm Finnish" (regardless of the misinterpretation), I'll say "Oh great," and begin eating food off their plates.

Note: This would almost certainly be part of a larger series across endless destinations called *Can I Get A Bite of That?* I figure somebody has to find out what part of the world has the people who are most willing to share their food with a stranger on camera. Why not me?

Another note: If *100 Flights* ever *were* to become a travel series, one of my running gags in every episode would be to have a bunch of scenes that open up as if I'm trying to say something interesting or touristy in whatever city I'm in, and then suddenly it gets completely derailed by me noticing a nearby dog (e.g., "You know, one of the most common misconceptions about Zurich as it contrasts with Geneva is that Zuri—OMG, look at that dog. Tommy are you getting this!?").

…

Here's some dopey one-offs because I like puns and technicalities:

[*Real-life sketch*]

I'd go to a food truck festival where I'd open up a stand called *Justice* that sells frozen cubes of water but nothing else, and then I'd wait around for someone to come up every now and then just to say, "Oh, I get it. Ha." Terrible, right? If I could bottle the groans and sell them to dadjoke lovers everywhere, that's where the real success would be.

[Another Pun *Skit*]

A one-liner short video in which a mom is yelling at her son to put the dairy spreads back in the refrigerator, saying "You butter put them away now mister or I'm gonna margarine there and unplug your Nintendo."

[*Skit*]

(Note: If you know about perfectly-cut scream videos, this one's for you):

So this guy wakes up in the late afternoon on September 12th after a long night out. When he comes into the living room looking like absolute shit, his roommate says, "Damn dude, what did you do last night?"

He responds, "Man, I don't even know what day it was yesterday."

His roommate gasps and says, "Omg, you're never supposed to forget 9/11."

(Then the camera does a superzoom close-up of the hungover guy's face and the skit ends just as he begins to scream, "*Ohhh FFUU----*")

…

[*Real-life sketch*]

One thing I mentioned before (in what's now officially Chapter 1, I believe) about living in Berlin is how simultaneously peeved and incredulous I am at the way that Germans will wait with mindless compliance before crossing the street if the signal is red, no matter how safe it is to cross. I daydream constantly about carrying around a fake German stop signal to put in random locations just to see what happens. (This is kind of like one of Dom Joly's hidden camera gags from his Trigger Happy TV show from years ago, where he dressed up as a road construction worker directing traffic with a Stop/Slow sign, but instead of the normal sign it said 'Stop' on both sides, and he'd spin it and people wouldn't see it at first and then they'd slam on their brakes. Sheer genius.) I'm pretty sure this fake red signal would work on the Germans, especially in front of the security line at the airport. Then again, I don't think I want to get arrested for disturbing the peace, so I'd probably film the sketch at various non-airport locations and call it an experiment on their sense of humor or something.

…

[*Harsh reality skit*]

Some yuppy tourist who wears Patagonia (aka PataGucci) clothing is kicking around a football with a young impoverished child in a distant third world country while his friends stand by and watch. In a sudden calamity, the tourist loses the child's ball by popping it accidentally or by kicking it over a fence. While he shows remorse at first, the way our Pata-goober turns to his friends and asks, "Did you get anything before that?" immediately reveals that he's less concerned about having destroyed the boy's only toy than he is about his friends having missed the opportunity to get video footage of them playing together. The scene ends as the group gets all riled up in a super bro-ey way (with out-of-frame shouts about how now he has nothing to post later on social media, mixed with comebacks about how it wouldn't have helped him get laid anyway), and meanwhile the camera slowly pans in on the sad kid.

…

[*Maybe it's a skit, maybe it's a real-life sketch. Depends how it goes.*]

I'd like to do a satirical mythbusters type of video on debunking the myth that it's super easy to purchase a gun in the States by filming a whole big dialogue that introduces itself about how long the video will probably be, but then it jump cuts to the end of a 15-minute background check before walking out of Walmart, legitimately surprised at how easy it turned out to be and the video is 38 seconds long in total. (Disclaimer: Like most issues, I'm not taking any sides. It's just for the jokes, *don't shoot me*).

This might also be the first episode of a series called "Responsi-hillbillies." The

name alone has platinum written all over it.

…

[*Skit*]

Okay, so Jesus was a carpenter, right? And carpentry is a craft that relies on details, precision, and safety to do a good job, right? Thus, we can only assume that when Jesus was carrying his cross, he very well *could* have been noticing and criticizing the craftsmanship along the way out of habit. I'd film a skit in which he wasn't so silent about it.

Jesus: "Hey, are these right angles? Did you even use a square?"

Gets whipped

Jesus: "There's no way this beam is level. You really should know better."

Gets whipped

Jesus: "Seriously, have you ever heard of measuring twice before cutting once?"

Gets whipped

Jesus: "I mean, look at this wood. Oh my Father, did you split the grain? You did, didn't you?"

Gets whipped

Then later on, the guy who is nailing Jesus (still nagging) to the cross gets frustrated and complains under his breath about the bluntness of the nails and/or the crooked face of the hammer causing him to struggle.

Jesus: "It's a poor carpenter who blames his tools!"

Scene ends with the sound of a hammer to the head.

(Jesus dies at least once in every story of his life, don't be mad at this one).

…

[*Just a dumb idea*]

One of my favorite ideas (that I'd like to make happen whether I have a camera crew or not) is to throw a fake bachelor party in a random city like New Orleans. This really has nothing to do with stereotypical bachelor party debauchery in any way, and everything to do with the fact that a bachelor party is one of the few

excuses a man has to wrangle up a bunch of friends he's met throughout different stages of life and bring them all together at once.

One of the tough things about having lived in a bunch of places that are all very far away from each other is trying to coordinate meeting up with various friends I haven't seen in a while, and that got me wondering why I couldn't just do it all at once. So my question is: why does there need to be a wedding or something for somebody to bring together a bunch of friends that would never otherwise meet? And, for example, if they're all good friends with me, what's stopping some of them from becoming even better friends with each other? I say there's nothing stopping that, and the easiest way to give this a try (in my opinion) happens to be a fake bachelor party.

The rules of the weekend are simple:

1. There's no groom in the group, and nobody pretends to be him. (That way nobody makes up conflicting stories as to why he doesn't know the other guys in the group.)
2. If you get asked where the groom to-be is, your two possible answers are:
   "He's on his way,"
   or
   "I think we lost him."
3. All participants are welcome to claim to be a groomsman, but nobody should claim to be the best man (since it'd be your fault the groom is missing, you friggin' idiot). So when the question about the best man arises, the answer is that he's the only one that's with the groom and/or he went to get him.

That's it. Guaranteed to be a great time.

…

[*Series of skits*]

I guess I'm bound to need recurring characters at some point to establish some kind of serialized familiarity, and one of them is a character who always finds himself in the most predictably scripted moments of everyday life; being so tired of people making the same dull jokes that have been said millions of times, he ruins them with painfully awkward or unexpected over-the-top reactions.

Scene 1:

He's finishing up dinner at a restaurant with his wife and daughter, when the waiter across the room sees him scooping up and eating the very last bits of food from his family's plates. He makes eye contact with the waiter and thinks to himself, "Don't say it," but it's too late. The waiter comes by and makes the obviously played out joke, "I guess you didn't like the food, hahahaha." Our guy looks him dead in the eye and says, "You're absolutely right, but we're not wealthy enough to waste food when we go out, so we won't be coming back here."

[Just hold on a sec].

Now, right away, you probably agree with me that this doesn't make for a funny skit at all. But get this: Next, everything goes up a notch when the man tells the waiter to go fuck himself and his 14-year-old daughter screams that he should never attempt that joke again. It's the daughter who really sells it here.

[Alright, now bear with me. It's the repetition of this that starts to get funny.]

Scene 2:

This time the man is working as a cashier at a convenience store when a customer comes in to buy shampoo or another product with a ridiculous name that nobody ever questions. When the man goes to scan the bottle, a scratch on the barcode gives him trouble and it doesn't work after three attempts.

He looks up at the customer, and once again you can hear the words emanating from inside the man's head. "Don't say it. Don't you fucking say it."

Nope, here it comes: "Looks like it's free of charge hahahaha."

At this point we'd film two different endings and see which one is funnier on screen, but first, obviously our guy tells the customer to go fuck himself in both scenarios.

In option A, our guy behind the counter takes out a gun, points it at his own head and shouts, "Promise me you'll never say that joke again or I'll end it all right now." The guy yells back in a panic, "How can I promise that? I can't be sure I won't say it accidentally someday." Our guy says "Oh, go fuck yourself," and they both scream at each other in escalating fear with super zoom jump-cuts on their faces until it fades away.

[Hmm, you know what? Change of plans. We'll use both anyway.]

So option A was just a daydream that the guy wakes up from, but the shampoo guy situation is real and currently happening. The guy snaps back in just in time to tell the customer to go fuck himself, but in option B, it's the customer who pulls out a gun and then says, "Actually *you* go fuck *yourself*. My shampoo *is* free, and this is a stickup."

[Maybe the shampoo guy takes off a mask and reveals he's the waiter from before. Maybe none of this was funny. Maybe go love yourself. I'm trying to come up with this shit on airplanes, cut me some slack.]

…

[*Series of skits*]

Okay, now this next character actually has potential. The working title right now is Earth Tourist, and it's about this male humanoid who is new to the planet for whatever reason, and he has trouble grasping certain concepts (such as how dogs and cats are not actually capable of managing their own Instagram accounts). The camera follows him as he's recording travel videos for his homies from wherever.

Scene 1:

He's in Manhattan, and it's his first time in a big city of any kind. As he's walking along the streets saying 'look at this' and 'look at that,' he comes across a homeless man whose outstretched hand is shaking a cup full of coins. Our guy

gets wide-eyed like when Buddy the Elf finds gum on the street, takes a huge fistful of coins out of the man's cup and shouts, "Look everyone, this man is giving out free money! This city is awesome!"

Scene 2:

He's at the doctor's office for his first physical. It's time for a urine sample, so they put him in one of those rooms with a toilet that also has a mini ledge on the wall with a tiny door at chest height connected to the nurse's room for collecting the sample directly.

Unsure of how to go about getting his business into the cup properly, our guy looks for any helpful instructions. Just above the ledge connected to the nurse's room is a sign that says "Place urine cup here."

Sure enough, our guy puts the cup on the ledge and starts spraying away.

Scene 3:

He's at the grocery store, and he's trying to return an item for the first time because it tasted yucky to him.

Guy: "What do you mean you won't take it back?"

Manager: "Sir, that's just Greek yogurt. It's fine."

Guy: "How do you mean?"

Manager: "Greek yogurt is tart. It's supposed to taste like that."

Guy: "So how can you tell if Greek yogurt has gone bad if it tastes like Greek yogurt either way?"

Manager: ...

Scene 4:

He's just moved into a shared flat. On the first night, he's about to relieve himself of number two in a toilet for the first time. Upon reaching the bathroom he finds his new roommate brushing her teeth and then putting her toothbrush in a cup by the sink on her way out.

Moments later, while sitting and doing his business, our guy looks back at the toothbrush and thinks about how it's used to clean the mouth. Then he looks down next to him where he sees a large toilet brush, and picks it up to examine it. Naturally, he assumes it must be for the opposite end of the body, and as he prepares to shove it all up in there, the scene fades away.

…

[*Just a dumb video idea*]

For some reason I'm still a huge fan of the Rickroll, and I think it'd be funny to make a documentary-style video that dissects the actual music video itself as if it were some kind of cinematic masterpiece. Like, my video would have almost nothing to do with the bait-and-switch prank that made "Never Gonna Give You Up" so popular, but instead it would be a deep dive into some stupidly exaggerated details about what makes the video so quote-unquote "perfect" or something (even though it's not), like the random jump cut of the guy doing a backflip in the stone archway and the weird pose he does after sticking the landing. I guarantee this video would hit over a million views.

[*Skit*]

I wanna write a skit about a big shot criminal defense attorney who keeps trying to defend his/her high profile clients by saying to the judge, "Why, your honor? Because *come aaaahhhhnnnn*" in some kind of John Travolta voice from Grease. This one definitely doesn't translate well into text, but I swear it would be funny on video.

Don't believe me?

Come aaaahhhhnnnn.

…

I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Majorca, 26 June 2018 and Majorca to Berlin, 27 June 2018.

For filming rights and press inquiries, please direct yourself to 100Flights.com and @100Flights on Twitter and Instagram.

PS, the fake bachelor party weekend ultimately took place in Nashville, Tennessee, 26-28 April 2019.

Also, for those who elected to skip the introduction back at the beginning, here's your reminder to go back and check that out.

XXX

1. True story. However, I'm not sure what I feel worse about right now: having been a finalist and not winning, or being pathetic enough to *need* to mention the fact that I was a finalist. Either way, Chris Farley was a legend. RIP. ↑

2. I liked those guys a lot though and I don't actually have anything bad to say, so if you can handle the look and feel of five-year-old content, the old stuff is really great. (I guess the new stuff is kinda lousy and prosaic, but you can blame YouTube for screwing its creators by valuing quantity and length over quality, hence the reason why good videos and successful YouTube videos can be two very different things these days. Will the hot take reaction fad ever end?) ↑

3. It's worth mentioning that claiming you liked Glover's work before it was mainstream cool doesn't really fly because you'd either have to claim you were following his specific writing contributions on 30 Rock (which is not plausibly believable), or you'd have to claim to have gotten extremely into the Derrick Comedy stuff from his NYU drama writing days, which would be a somewhat paradoxical claim because it would necessitate referencing back to a time when the topic of rape could be funny (i.e., because Derrick Comedy's most popular video sketch was *Bro Rape*) and since it no longer can, it's impermissible to admit liking the video. Either way it's a hard sell. ↑

4. The [*sic*] in this case stands for both the intentional error and the *sick* pun I just dropped at the same time, holy shit did you see that? So sick. ↑

5. A Macguffin is a motivating element in a movie or a book that serves the sole purpose of driving the plot forward. ↑

Chapter 16: Super Duper Shooty Hoopy Dream Team

Once upon a time I was a 'paid' columnist for my university newspaper, and at every editorial meeting I was supposed to be pitching an idea for my next column. These meetings were always the day after my latest one had just come out, however, so I rarely showed up with anything to say (apart from "I don't know yet"). As a result, it ultimately became a running gag of mine to pitch that I'd be doing one of those purely speculative sports pieces every week (you know, the kind that doesn't really mean anything and then quickly goes out of date). Unfortunately, since we already had a smaller sports section full of that stuff anyway, my editors never allowed it—*except for that one time I got away with doing a column about Tim Tebow the week he took over as starting quarterback for the Broncos, but that was a special case*.

Anyway, now that I don't have editors ~~who know better~~ to tell me no, I figured this would be a good time to finally do a big ol' pointless sports feature—*though not about Tebow, whom I imagine must be dead, since Jesus himself wouldn't even have come back after getting crucified by the media the way poor Timmy did*.

That said, if you're not into pro sports entertainment and wanna sit this one out, that's perfectly fine. Just please keep in mind that the '*Hooray Sportsball! Go make the score and win the points*!' comments were only marginally funny the first time. Yes, it's nobody's job to like something to fit in, but being edgy and condescending is still so much worse than just being polite. (*And yet I keep insisting*.)

So let's get after it.

I want to start off by saying that I'm saltier than the Dead Sea over how the 2017-18 NBA season ended with a *fourth* rematch between the Cavaliers and the Warriors. And even with the anticlimactic repeat of last season's results (i.e., the Warriors winning handedly and leaving us all aggrieved), the free agency period that followed made it abundantly clear that the NBA still has my attention by the balls. I don't even watch games unless it's the fourth quarter.

First, LeBron goes and leaves Cleveland in favor of ~~filming Space Jam 2~~ retiring as a Laker (as evidenced by his signing of a four-year deal instead of a one-plus-one), essentially putting to bed any chances of him being in the finals next season. Next, the already star-studded Warriors go and pick up DeMarcus 'Boogie' Cousins for a deal worth 115 million fewer Costco hot dogs (aka $1.50 with a soda since 1985) than the max deal he had cooking before his Achilles pulled an Achilles on him. Together, both of these things have made for an outrageous turn of events in the West, and that's especially dispiriting for me now that I've been a Lakers fan for almost a whole week.

But like it or not, Cousins is a Golden State Warrior, and that's led to roughly a hundred or so demoralized NBA players airing their grievances on Twitter with statements of comic relief and/or memes,[1] which only seems to mask everyone's outrage with the league. Nonetheless, what most people haven't considered yet is how the NBA players may have brought this new era of superteams upon themselves in the first place, since the players' union shot down the league's proposal for the salary cap to rise incrementally in response to a lucrative new TV deal after the 2015-16 season, opting instead for it to make one fat jump. Thus, when player reps voted unanimously to bust open the salary cap from like $70 million to $95 million (meaning all teams would suddenly gain an equal amount of whopping *additional* space), they essentially opened the door for the defending champion Warriors to sign former league MVP Kevin Durant as casually as getting a walk-in haircut.

So congratulations, NBPA, you played yourself, and now superteams are the super-est they've ever been. Sure, everyone got a nice payday overall, but it

came at the cost of a more competitive league. I mean, how can anybody expect to defeat a team that has a starting lineup of five current Team USA players (plus one more coming off the bench)? I'll tell you:

~~Injuries and trades.~~ You totally ignore it and debate about what the best superteam of all time would be instead. That's right, and I've taken the liberty of laboring over the history books to find out the answer.

So here we go, my 13-man roster of the best team ever assembled; the only parameters left to note are that every player takes a Boogie deal by signing a one-year contract worth a bit under 7 million smackaroos, every player gets along so there's no presumptive ball-hogging, and let's not pervert the game by straying from the classic five player positions (i.e., you gotta field a traditional starting lineup and second string with Point Guards, Shooting Guards, Small Forwards, Power Forwards, and Centers).

Starting Point Guard

First up is the point guard to distribute the ball when we have it, and to recover the ball when we don't. John Stockton is the NBA's all-time leader in assists, and John Stockton is the NBA's all-time leader in steals.[2] Those two records may never be broken, so he's the undeniable choice. Stockton is perhaps the most reliable player in history as well, considering he reached the playoffs all 19 years of his career. If that somehow weren't enough, he was also an ironman who started all 82 games of the season when he was 37 years old, which he also did at 38. And at 39. And at 40. *Get absolutely grampa-ed*.

Starting Shooting Guard

The starting shooting guard ought to be the best scorer we've ever seen, as his one and only job for us is to get buckets. Michael Jordan led the league in scoring 10 times. He's hit about 25 game-winners, including ones to win the NBA Finals and the NCAA Championship. Jordan is 4th all-time in points and 3rd all-time in steals, making him the only shooting guard in history to even be in the top 10 all-time in points and steals. He's also one of the most competitive individuals on the planet, which is great for the team but not so much for him because of his compulsive gambling habits.[3] I mean, the man literally gambled on his own life during a second-half timeout in the original Space Jam movie for fuck's sake. He sure can score, though, and I'm proud to say I was in attendance for the last game of his career.

Starting Small Forward

The small forward position in today's game calls for the biggest, fastest, most versatile, and best two-way player in the gym. LeBron James is the most gifted basketball player who ever lived. If he remains healthy for *just* the remainder of his current contract (taking him to 37 years old), he's projected to become the NBA's all-time leader in points, 3rd all-time in assists, and 5th all-time in steals. [4] And while those rankings would make him the only player ever to crack the top 10 in all of those particular categories, it's already insanely impressive for him to be at the top three in points and assists alone, because *nobody does that*. Nobody even comes close to doing that, because putting up any kind of historical offensive numbers usually requires a player to choose between being a scorer or a passer, yet somehow LeBron impossibly does both.

Alright, I can't avoid the obvious, so I'll bite.

The nice part about putting together the greatest superteam of all time is that I don't have to get into the whole LeBron vs Michael 'Who is the GOAT?' debate, since I can just slap them into their respective starting positions, no questions asked. That said, I'm diving into the whole LeBron vs Michael thing

anyway, so here's my hot take (*and it's totally not a copout, so pay close attention*): In a league that's all about individual scoring and championships, Michael is without a doubt the better scorer and champion, while LeBron happens to be the better all-around basketball player despite how he and his team have lost the majority of his eight consecutive finals appearances. Michael Jordan is the greatest NBA player of all time, but LeBron James is the greatest basketball player of all time. One-on-one, I'm picking Michael every time, but five-on-five, gimme LeBron. ~~Just not against Jordan.~~ Don't @ me.

Starting Power Forward

Getting back to my heavily historical and stats-ridden selection process (and bending the rules when it comes to classifying the position of the Bigman, Center-Forward, and/or Center), my starting Power Forward is a defensive stud with the size and agility to do everything.[5] Hakeem Olajuwon is the only player in league history to be in the top 15 all-time in four of the five main scoresheet categories. He's 1st in blocks, 8th in steals, 11th in points, and 13th in rebounds. This dude did *everything*. In 1990, he recorded a quadruple double of 29 points, 18 rebounds, 11 blocks, and 10 assists in a single game—which has only happened three other times in league history (although Hakeem was once an assist shy of doing it again himself). In his 1993-94 season, which was probably the best individual season by anyone ever, Hakeem won MVP, Defensive Player of the Year, All-NBA 1st Team, All-Defensive 1st team, and Finals MVP, while also becoming the first player to win the NBA Finals with *zero* other All-Stars on his team. During that playoff run, he led his team in points, steals, assists, rebounds, and blocks. Absolute monster.

Starting Center

If the Warriors aren't dead yet, the starting Center will put them out of their misery. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is the leading scorer in NBA history, ranks 3rd all-time in rebounds, and ranks 3rd all-time in blocks. There's nothing to argue.

The Warriors might shoot a high percentage from 3-point range, but Kareem shot a skyhook that was *literally* unguardable between him and the basket. The man won the MVP award five times in his first eight seasons, and the two times he won the Finals MVP award were 15 seasons apart. He even wore glasses on the court to encourage other seven-footers to read.

Alright, so there's my starting five: Stockton, Jordan, James, Olajuwon, and Abdul-Jabbar. Now comes the tricky part of selecting a platoon of second-stringers and the final reserves.

Backup Point Guard

It may be a shocker to some, but when we go on pure data the numbers don't lie at the Point Guard position. Jason Kidd is the spit and image of Stockton, resting behind him at number two all-time in assists and number two all-time in steals. Kidd has the 3rd most triple doubles in NBA history, and he even had a baby boy that regularly showed up courtside with what I swear was the shadow of a mustache on his upper lip.

Backup Shooting Guard

Now, if anyone can fill the shoes of Air Jordan at Shooting Guard, it's Kobe Bryant. Some people (myself included) actually consider Kobe to be one of the best method actors of all time, considering how he forged an entire career path out of emulating Jordan *while he was still a teenager*. At 17 years old, he could walk like him, talk like him, shoot fadeaways like him, even dunk with his tongue out like him—and the moment his name was called, he became the youngest player ever drafted to the NBA. As time passed, the comparisons to Jordan never went away simply because Kobe never stopped scoring. By the end of his career, the Black Mamba was an 18-time All-Star who won five rings,

ranked 3rd in NBA history for points, and *oh yeah*, he put up 36 game-winning shots. Unreal.

Backup Small Forward

Nobody can replicate what LeBron does at Small Forward, but Larry Bird is *clearly* pretty good at trying for a white guy. (Again, if you've seen Space Jam, you know the quote I'm talking about: "Larry's not white. Larry's clear.") He also averaged a career double double, won the MVP award and a ring three times each, and most impressively, he managed to do all of this back in the days when they still wore speedos on the court. Ultimately, I guess this spot might have otherwise gone to Kevin Durant (had he not joined Golden State), but still, I'd much rather see Larry Bird wearing the budgie-smuggler shorts over KD—because there's just something about those pasty whites.

Backup Power Forward

It's probably a good idea to throw in a true Power Forward, and there's nobody truer than the mailman. Currently, Karl Malone is the only guy not named Kareem to have top-10 all-time numbers in three categories: he's 2nd all-time in points, 7th all-time in rebounds, and 10th in steals. Either LeBron or Chris Paul will bump him out of the steals category soon enough, but for now that is an outstanding track record for the big postal worker who used to cameo on The Man Show.

Backup Center

It's not every day that a Center gets in the conversation for best player ever, but

that conversation is for people who aren't on my bench. *That's right, zip it. You keep quiet on my bench.* Wilt Chamberlain's game can speak up for itself, having at least 20 points and 20 rebounds in practically every contest he played in the entire 1960s decade. It may be a hot take, but many believe the only reason he (and Bill Russell for that matter) never won the MVP, Defensive Player of the Year, or Finals MVP award, is because those awards didn't exist during their time. Sure, 100 points in a game is immortal no matter how lopsided the competition may have been, but it's also overrated—because the *true* crowning achievement of Chamberlain's career is that he was the only man who ever legitimately blocked Kareem's skyhook (which supposedly happened once or twice during Kareem's rookie year).

So that's our second string: Kidd, Bryant, Bird, Malone, and Chamberlain. Before turning to the final three reserves, I'd like to round out the front office personnel.

Head Coach

My head coach would be Dave Winfield, a former MLB player and hall of famer who is currently a special assistant to the executive director of the MLB Players Association. Having been drafted by the NBA, the ABA, the MLB, and the NFL (despite how he never played college football), Winfield is simply the best athlete the world has ever seen, which means nobody on the superteam could ever talk shit to him. And not that it matters, but he'd also break the mold of how great players don't always make successful coaches, since this team would be successful with a pile of dirty laundry as its coach.

General Manager

To compliment Winfield, my GM would be the most underrated sports hero of

all-time. Mark Moseley was the only special-teams player in NFL history to win the MVP award, which he did in 1982 during a strike-shortened season as a kicker for the Washington Redskins. If that weren't enough, Moseley's got some executive-level chops as well, as he's currently the Director of Franchising for Five Guys (and that tugs on my heartstrings a little bit because one is coming to Berlin.)

First Reserve

Okay, back to the roster. I still need another true Power Forward who can match up and deal with Draymond Green's bullshit antics with aplomb, so adding the classiest dude ever should do. Tim Duncan is so polite that he was once ejected from a game for laughing on the bench, as this was the worst offense of his career by far. Duncan is 5th all-time in blocks (having goaltended *only* 15 times in 19 seasons), 6th all-time in rebounds, 14th in points, and he was two blocks away from posting a quadruple double in the finals game that won him his second of five rings. He's also dead last in basketball history for profanities shouted on the court, and he's dead last in shopping for clothes anywhere other than Burlington Coat Factory.

Second Reserve

I recently had two cactus plants in my home named Jamal and Eric who got sick and died, but now I'm wondering if they were really Shaqtus plants that I could've saved had I given them Gold Bond or Icy Hot. This complete abomination of a sentence was brought to you by three Shaquille O'Neal commercial endorsements,[6] but what isn't shitty (*like this incredible segue*) is adding Shaq to the squad. The Big Aristotle is 8th in points, 8th in blocks, 15th in rebounds, 1st in shattered backboards, and he's probably the scariest human being to ever take the court, while also being the nicest one off it.

Btw, for any skeptics of the starting lineup who think that a pairing of Kareem with Hakeem wouldn't hack it in today's game, Shaq has been waiting for you. After tipoff, Kazaam immediately comes off the bench and checks in for one of the two big dogs at the first whistle. That way, coach Winfield can pay respects to the starters, while still making way for Shaq Diesel. It's called a Tip'n'Dip, and Duncan might get a piece of that action sometimes as well. Lastly, in case any additional closure was needed, my cactus plants sadly did die, but I've managed to carry on.

Third Reserve

Predictably, deciding who gets the final roster spot has caused me the most problems. Nevertheless, considering how my eventual selection was putting up LeBron-like numbers in an era before steals and blocks were ever recorded, Oscar Robertson is the most deserving, so he gets the call. The big O not only ranks 12th all-time in points and 6th all-time in assists, but he also averaged a triple double over the first five years of his career.

So that's it: O'Neal, Duncan, and Robertson round out the bench.

What this means, however, is that I've just assembled a full team without including Magic Johnson, and that's perhaps the most glaring pitfall of building a roster based ~~heavily~~ entirely on all-time stats (since Magic's career numbers were cut short by roughly four seasons due to his early retirement after contracting HIV). Nevertheless my selection still stands.

Now, the biggest naysayers will probably say (apart from 'nay') that everything is null and void because I am not including Magic. That you gotta have Magic. That I don't know what I'm talking about if I don't have Magic in there. That it's stupid to keep Magic off when I know he was better. But look, this team is

gonna beat the Warriors no matter what; the metrics here are based on who earned it with a fat career, and Magic only got fat *after* his career ended.

What's that? But Magic has five championships? Umm, rings don't matter here because this team is winning one anyway, remember? That's the whole point. And while we're at it, this also answers why we don't need Ray Allen or Reggie Miller on the bench to keep up with perimeter shooting trends. We're already gonna win, and besides bitch, Larry Bird can make it rain from wherever he wants, since he was the first (and second) player to ever record a 50-40-90 season (i.e., respective field goal percentages for 2-pointers, 3-pointers, and free throws). Not only that, but he also won back-to-back-to-back three-point contests at All-Star weekend (which were the first ones they ever held), and he would've won more had he not simply decided to retire after winning the third one without even taking off his warm-up jacket. Look it up.

But fine. Even though I'm a firm believer that a player's best ability is his availability, I still crunched the numbers and cross-evaluated Magic's career projections to make sure it was the right call—and I swear it's not because of AIDS or whatever, so stop it.

First of all, to calculate Magic's projected numbers (e.g., as if he played four additional years inside of a bubble), I arbitrarily decided to use the averages from his last five uninterrupted seasons, and that's more than fair for anyone in their 30s not named LeBron. Second of all, the only guys Magic has a case for replacing are Kidd and Robertson, and that's already a trolley problem because those three make up the entire podium of career triple doubles (i.e., Robertson, Johnson, and Kidd are 1st, 2nd, and 3rd all-time, respectively). Third of all, since the rules prioritize what we need at Point Guard a bit differently than what we're looking for in a final reserve (i.e., steals and assists vs all-around versatility), the comparisons can't exactly be done equally. And finally, for the sake of fairness, while I ultimately considered what Magic's numbers *could have been,* I did not completely disregard the fact that they weren't.

In the case for Magic and his 'coulda-woulda-shoulda' stats (Magic CWS), Magic would've jumped up to become the all-time leader in triple doubles, he'd be number 25 all-time in points ahead of Allen Iverson, and he'd have surpassed Kidd for 2nd all-time in assists behind Stockton, which is huge. Nevertheless, since all we really care about in the Backup Point Guard role is assists and steals, Magic's CWS rankings of 2nd and 7th still aren't convincing enough to kick out Kidd's 3rd and 2nd, especially when Kidd's rebounds and blocks were still on par or better than Magic's projected totals with four extra years. There's just no way you're getting Kidd out of there when he's protected by the rules.

Moving over to Robertson, the tricky thing about evaluating Oscar's history is that he played in an era before steals and blocks were recorded, so the X-factor of being a complete two-way player (aka what we want in our only non-bigman reserve) is a bit harder to delineate. That said, he's still the all-time leader in triple doubles, lol. And although his 6th all-time in assists isn't as good as Magic CWS having moved up to 2nd, Oscar would still be close behind in rebounds, and he would still dominate in points scored. Don't get me wrong though, Magic CWS definitely has a case here because he may actually have overtaken Robertson as all-time leader in triple doubles, but I don't know, you just can't take the true all-time leader off the team due to a hypothetical. And honestly, even if the eyeball test goes to Magic over Kidd or Robertson, it's already a sham to be ~~doing literally any of this~~ dissecting whether or not Magic would've made it to 181 triple doubles when there are only four other players (apart from the podium) to break 50.

Side note: all this talk about triple doubles might even be irrelevant because the game has evolved to make them come easier and easier. Plus Jordan only had 28 and he's never going to leave the conversation for best ever.

Thus, at the end of the purely speculative day, Mr. Johnson remains as the odd one out. That said, I'd hate to leave a guy with a medical condition out on the street (even if he's worth half a billion dollars), so I checked the NBA's Collective Bargaining Agreement for any loopholes—and wouldn't you know it,

here's what I found on page 382:

Article XXIX, Section 2, Inactive Roster.

"...(ii) any Team that has thirteen (13) players on its Active List may

have one (1) player on its Inactive List, and may, from time to time as appropriate, but for no more than two (2) consecutive weeks at any time

during the Regular Season, have zero (0) players on its Inactive List."

Welp, say no more. That's not even a loophole because I needed an inactive 14th man anyway. Boom. Swish. Game. Set. Match.

…

I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Helsinki, 4 July 2018, and Helsinki to Berlin, 6 July 2018.

XXX

1. The best, imo, was either Enes Kanter's photoshop of the NBA's commissioner holding up a Warriors jersey (as if *he* were the next big signing), or the tweet by Larry Nance Jr. which was simply a well-known reaction GIF of himself (Larry Nance Jr.) scratching his head. ↑

2. All numerical rankings are ATOW (at time of writing), though nobody is catching up to Stockton here. ↑

3. By the way, I'm a staunch proponent of the real story in 1994 being that Michael was caught gambling Pete Rose-style, but because he was the irreplaceable face of basketball, the league offices colluded with him behind the scenes so he could serve his inevitable suspension by 'retiring' and playing minor league baseball instead of tarnishing the league's image by sitting out those 150 games in shame. ↑

4. And that's based on total career averages alone, which doesn't even consider how well he's been playing more recently (e.g., this past season was his best yet in assists and rebounds, and it was his 4th best year in points and blocks). The dude ages like wine. ↑

5. Btw, most of my info is from *Basketball Reference* and *ESPN* databases, so there may be some discrepancies here and there when it comes to league vs NBA history because of ABA stuff, but for the most part I'm careful about it. ↑

6. 'Shaqtus' was for Scrabble, though technically it was just a prop in an *NBA on ESPN* promo. ↑

Chapter 17: The Art of the Moochie Goochie

In all my travels, there are two things that I'm surprised (yet proud) to say I've never done. The first is that I've never missed a flight. (I've definitely had a delay that forced me to miss a connection before, but never when it was my fault or anything like that.) And that's not for a lack of trying or risk-taking either, since these days it's basically my goal to show up at the airport late enough so that my flight is boarding by the time I reach the gate. Considering how much I've been flying this year, it's just nice having it streamlined to the point where I never stop moving from the moment I pass security to the moment I'm in my seat.

Naturally, getting this comfortable has had its hiccups at times, but my only major scares have come on the rare occasions when I've needed to check a bag at the counter and the agent insisted that the flight had already been closed. Usually I can make it through with just a slap on the wrist in these situations, but if it gets really dire, there's always my trusty 'get out of jail free' card:

"Please. Can you just try? It's for a wedding, I'll make it." (*Don't abuse this.*)

I've also had my name called on the terminal's PA system once or twice in the past, and not because I like the attention—that's just a coincidence. Either way, I guess the, "Attention in the concourse: *Doofus*, your gate is closing, *Mr. Doofus*, your gate is closing," still counts as good press according to cliché, so I'll take it.

The other thing I've never done while traveling is that I've never slept overnight in an airport terminal. I'm certainly pleased with that, though not necessarily because of the stigma that it's kind of a sleazy thing to do. (I mean, it's basically a rite of passage in the backpacking community.) Instead, I feel more gratitude over how lucky I've been, all things considered, having completely avoided ever being stranded somewhere in the first place.

Nevertheless, due to an absolutely classic blunder, let's just say that both of those things became strong possibilities when I left for the airport this afternoon —*only I had no idea at the time*. And sparing the finer details (for now), there was also a potential domino effect in place where missing my first ever flight would've almost certainly led me to experience my first ever airport blanket drill as well. And sure, doing all of that in a package deal would suck, but it wouldn't be the end of the world either, so why do I care?

Well, for starters, making this flight was important because otherwise I'd be leaving a buddy of mine waiting for me high and dry in Athens, having just flown there from Vienna himself. But it's not just that. I'm also closing in on a hundred flights in a year here (which I'm sure I've mentioned at least a hundred times), so I can't exactly be missing any if I want to hit that milestone. I mean, this shit is planned out already, and we're in crunchtime right now; if I don't manage to add five more flights in the next two weeks, I'll regrettably have to push back my yearlong window, and that means I'll somehow have to outpace the eleven flights I took during the first month (of my current window) by booking up to 16 more, and that would totally ruin me.

So yeah, I'm not saying that my dream of reaching one hundred was hinging on me making this flight… *but it was kind of hinging on me making this flight.*

And look, as a general reminder, the fact that I'm on the verge of that many flights in a year doesn't mean I have the kind of resources and/or capital to accomplish it without an insane amount of luck, planning, dieting (*because who can afford airport food?*), coincidence, effort, and opportunity. I've been so bloody fortunate that the stars have aligned time and time again for me throughout this whole thing, and it's all been smooth sailing to boot. That said, anything goes wrong now and I can still come up short pretty easily.

Yet if that's the case, and if I *knew* it was going to be the case, then why would I continue to press my luck this late in the game like a complete dipshit?

Well, because I fucked up, okay? I was on autopilot.

The previous three times I had left Berlin, my flight took off from the city's nicer airport, and that's only a 20-minute bus ride away from my apartment. Today, however, my flight was out of the dumpier airport (*which the city has been 'trying' to replace for literally a dozen years*), and that one can take over an hour for me to get to by train. (To be fair, I didn't actually *go* to the wrong airport, I simply *almost* did.)

So there I was, waiting for a bus I shouldn't have been waiting for, when thankfully (*don't ask me how*) I figured it out just as the bus was arriving. Upon realizing my mistake, I immediately jayran across the street ~~and got arrested by German police~~ and threw myself down the stairs of the nearest railway station. Then I checked the time to see if I had *any* chance of making it.

It was going to be close—like, *Gillette Mach3SuperTurbo5.0 with fifteen extra blades and four aloe strips* close.

So, in a 'controlled' panic, I boarded the train and got straight to work; first, I immediately looked up my exact flight's on-time performance history and saw that nine out of its last ten departures were around 30 minutes late (which I thought was a good start, but then I remembered that this has almost nothing to do with whether or not they finished the boarding process on schedule). Next, I logged into my booking to see if there were any add-ons I could purchase to speed up my time at security (but then I remembered that this airport doesn't even have that kind of thing despite how the other one in Berlin does). Hence, seeing as there was no way of telling the train conductor to go faster (apart from

getting close to his door and yelling, *"Wir müssen schneller gehen!"*), the only thing left to do was to say "Fuck it," because the die had been cast. It was time to throw caution to the wind, use everything I had been training for during these last 94 flights, and hope like hell that I'd get lucky just one more time.

Side note: as dramatic as it sounds, that's the level of tension I was feeling on the train earlier. At the end of the day, it wasn't even about missing a flight; it was about missing *this* flight, because it was suddenly the linchpin for whether or not I'd be making it to 100. And while it may be true that my yearlong quest for triple digits is of very little consequence to anyone but me, it's also true that I just bought 100flights.com ten days ago, lol. That said, here's why missing the plane to Athens would be even worse:

First of all, considering how much time and effort I've been putting into planning ahead, I was at least considerate enough to have already booked my one hundredth flight for a few days *before* the cutoff so that I'd have a small safety net in case anything went wrong down the stretch; I even made a contingency plan of flying to and around Poland during those last few days as well. Two days ago, however, a good friend of mine (who doesn't live in Europe but will suddenly be visiting France in two weeks) persuaded me to visit him in Paris during that time instead, and it remains to be seen if that'll tie up my Polish safety net or not. As a result, what I knew as of this particular train ride to the dumpier Berlin airport was that I'd be reaching 101 confirmed flights by day 364 of my window *if and only if* I made this trip to the Greek capital—otherwise I'd be sitting on ninety-fucking-nine.

So despite being halfway resigned to just trying my best and hoping for it too, I hated the thought of potentially tripping at the finish line. And perhaps there's some recency bias here as well, but I don't think I've ever been more ripping-my-hair-out nervous in my entire life, save for maybe that time I was pacing back and forth (and slamming a last-minute gin and tonic or three) before officiating my brother's wedding ceremony.

I'm trying to think of a more relatable example. Imagine you have to go pee, like, *really* badly, and so you're rushing to a bathroom. Do you know how the desperation somehow gets exponentially worse the closer and closer you get to the bathroom door? It's kind of like that. And despite how you're actually *closer* to the goal, not reaching it now would be all the more devastating.

Clearly I couldn't let that happen, so I needed ~~an adult diaper~~ a backup plan. Unfortunately, this proved to be a lot harder than I thought, because apparently getting to Athens from Berlin is a huge pain in the ass. Granted, all of this was as last-minute as it gets, but I spent the rest of the train ride trying to come up with a pragmatic solution, and here's a reenactment of how that went down:

"Okay, first of all, if I miss this flight, there are no other flights (or combination of flights) that would get me there tonight. Also, evidently neither of Berlin's two airports has any direct flights tomorrow (unless they're already sold out), so at best I would make it to Athens by tomorrow night if I left in the morning and connected somewhere else. That would be pretty shitty, and it looks way too expensive anyway. Then again, it would make even *less* sense for me to take a direct flight the following day just to turn around and come back on my existing return flight 24 hours later. In that case I'd probably just stay home rather than burn all of that cash."

At this point I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about simply booking the cheapest flights to somewhere else instead, despite how that would've made me a terrible friend.

"Hey man, sorry I couldn't join you, but don't worry, I'm still gonna get the flights I need because I'm on my way to Brussels. Have fun in Athens!"

The mere fact that I would entertain this idea just goes to show how ridiculous

things were getting, but again, that's the level of tension I was feeling, and it looked like there'd be no 'get out of jail free' card this time.

"Please. Can you just try? It's for my funeral."

Nevertheless, if there's one thing that I've learned from 94 flights of politely zoning out during the flight attendant's instructions, it's to keep in mind that your nearest exit may be behind you. Having resorted to searching for *every single* available flight scheduled to arrive in Athens over the following 24 hours (in addition to how I'd have to get myself to each of those origin airports), there was only one move that I could pull off if I ultimately missed my 5pm departure. To swing it, I'd have to make an absolutely legendary pivot out of the airport, haul ass all the way up to Berlin's *other* airport, take the 8pm flight to Paris (coincidentally), sleep there overnight, and then jump on the 6am flight to Athens the next morning. It was aggressive yet doable, and also more importantly, it was still mildly affordable. The only question mark was whether or not I could get away with sleeping in the terminal since the morning flight would not be a connection, but a fully separate ticket.

[Enter random strangers on the Internet.]

"Yes, you turd. You can do that."

Thanks to a handful of anonymous reviews on the aptly named website sleepinginairports.net (as well as some galaxy-brain google search queries like, *"landside airside definition,"* and *"how early can you go through airport security"*), I was convinced that this would work. If I missed my upcoming flight to Athens, I would immediately book the flight to Paris and then—*SKRRRRT*—I'd bust a move to the other airport. It would take up to an hour and a half by train and then bus, but I'd make it (*with or without fast-track security*).

So there it was; despite my raging anxiety, I had a salvageable backup plan. When my train arrived at the airport, my shoes were laced up tightly and my phone was configured to book the ticket to Paris with only one final click. In the end, I was the final passenger to board the plane to Athens, and we officially departed 21 minutes behind schedule.

And just like that, I sighed the sweet sigh of bladder relief knowing that I'd be finishing my marathon to a hundred, even if I had pee trickling down my leg—and the moral of this story is that *anonymous people on the Internet gave me hope*.

Seriously though, the imaginary stakes were so high, and there's no way I would've been willing to book the backup itinerary if I had seen a review indicating, for instance, that Orly Airport security would kick me out to find a last-minute hotel at a price that would've negated the plan of flying to Paris in the first place (*similar to how taking a taxi from one Berlin airport to the other would've cost more than my plane ticket*). At the same time, I probably wouldn't even have considered giving it a try if none of those reviews existed. And those reviews, which were made freely by randos ~~for fake internet points~~ for no other reason than out of the kindness of their hearts, they saved me.

But it wasn't just those people on sleepinginairports.net who saved me, and it wasn't just this once. There must be thousands upon thousands of reviews out there on Google Maps, WikiTravel, Hostelworld, TripAdvisor, SeatGuru, and countless of other booking and/or special interest sites that I've ruthlessly been fleecing for information over the years without ever contributing anything back (*besides that one time I made a donation to Wikipedia like three years ago*). In fact, I'd go so far as to say that in all my travels, I think there's a third thing I've never done: I've never voluntarily left an online review, anonymous or not. (The only thing that comes close is how I've probably left feedback on a few Airbnb hosts/properties, but that's a necessary evil in order to gain public reviews of yourself as a guest, so that's definitely not attributable to the kindness of my

heart.)

Thus, when it comes to the wealth of information created by the kind and generous folks who leave online reviews, I am the ultimate mooch-lord. I am a leech on the system, and despite the lengths I would normally go in order to defend myself over things like this, there's just no escaping it this time. I don't even have the right to poke fun at reviewers who say things like, "I give this restaurant one star for being closed when my wife wanted to go," because at least they're *trying* to contribute. Meanwhile, I've been to hundreds of great places this year, and it's all thanks to stolen advice that I've never given back. I'm essentially the Vincenzo Preuggia of online reviews, and I can't believe I keep getting away with it.

What's perhaps even worse, though, is how I've had so much practice reading so many reviews in so little time that I actually feel snobby about how much better I've gotten at determining which ones I can trust (beyond the obviously fake stuff and other balderdash that I wish I had the right and/or time to make fun of). And sure, at the end of the day, choosing a place to stay or a place to eat or a product to buy based on what we read online is all just oversaturated guesswork anyway, but the weird part is how we *know* it is. Like, we *know* that anonymous people on the internet aren't very reliable, yet we still value them because they make us *feel* like we're making informed decisions. And you know what? That's probably what my backup plan for Athens was really about in the first place: all I really wanted was the feeling that everything would work out in the end.

So now that I've had time to catch my breath, I'm starting to think that maybe I ought to have booked the backup flights to Paris and Athens while I was still on the train anyway, you know, just in case. After all, when you compare the amount of stress I was feeling to how much I might have been willing to pay *not* to feel it, I suppose it was a no-brainer. Then again, you can't win unless you play the game, baby. Deep down, maybe I was just looking for one last dance with the devil before this whole thing comes to an end in two weeks. And who knows, maybe I'll have left a couple online reviews by the time it does. (*Lol,*

who am I kidding?)

I give this chapter two and a half stars.

…

I wrote this on a flight from Berlin to ~~Paris~~ Athens, 11 July 2018.

XXX

Chapter 18: Efficiency Boners and the Best Day Ever

Back when I was living in California during my early 20s, I was always stupidly annoyed by the over-glorification of the state. Maybe it was just more pronounced among my age bracket at the time, but I got the impression that there was a disproportionate amount of people who were living there (or had moved there, rather) just so they could say they lived in *Califoooornia*.

That's an absurd reduction, sure, but for folks who enjoy grandstanding (in their early 20s), it's also an easy win. There's probably millions of people (regardless of their age) who effectively view life as a social ladder, and Hollywood seems to do a good job of propagating the notion that if you live in California, well, then you've somehow made it.

Of course, yet another qualification would be to say that this is hardly applicable to everyone, but that's also kinda worthless because all that really does is target the exact type of people who *fit* the criteria—*but don't think they do, and would never consider admitting it, even to themselves*—and lets them off the hook. It's your classic case of 'identity-protective' cognition, right? Since why would anybody interpret their own subjective mentality as being distorted? I mean, nobody's *that* open-minded. (Not even in California, lol). And don't get me wrong, people who are actually *from* California don't get a free pass either. Sure, they're probably used to all the Hollywood praise by now, but they've also been predisposed to it *since birth*, so it's entirely possible that they're ~~god's gift to the planet~~ the least woke to it out of everybody. (*That is, everybody in their early 20s, remember?*)

Sweeping generalizations ~~incoming~~ aside, exploiting the desirable image of California as a marketing tool has been a global practice throughout (albeit not limited to) my lifetime—it even had a historical head start, because the very first documented reference to a place called 'California' was found in a 16th-century Spanish novel, which started out by depicting California as an island, *and then it said* California was physically located next to Terrestrial Paradise aka the Garden of Eden, *and then it said* the only metal found on the island of California

was gold. (Btw, well into the 18th century, California was still being misrepresented as an island on European maps.)

Today, practically every airport-having city in the world has at least one downtown café or restaurant with a name like *The California Bistro*. By now, you'd think some do-gooders from Orange County would've started making accusations about cultural appropriation or whatever, but in reality there's probably very little downside to having your state as a global brand. And, based on the sheer ubiquity of state-related apparel that you see alone, I'm not sure if any other states even come close to being as 'statriotic' as California is, save for maybe Colorado or Texas.[1]

What remains for California, anyhow, is a slightly in-your-face display of idolatry—kind of like what the entire USA seems to adopt every single time the Olympics roll around (you know, because of all the gold medals Team America wins with its immense population that throws tons of money at events which no other country seems to compete in, in addition to throwing just as much if not more money at the popular sports as well).

Like, we get it. California has tons of beautiful trees, great weather, beaches, mountains, and money. The state is truly spoiled for everything it has, which is *exactly* why I always thought it was the *only* place I could ever put together my personal rendition of 'the best day ever' (i.e., to go skiing in the early morning, play a round of golf in the early afternoon, and still make it to the beach by sunset). Where else can you do *that*? As long as you save time in the afternoon by bombing all your drives down the middle of the fairway and waiting until you're on the putting surface before completely blowing up your round (like me), then it's a piece of cake if you start at Lake Tahoe. (*Damn, I still need to give this a try someday*.)

Anyway, even though I'm long gone from California by now, I can still make a big stink about how often I get asked (by non-Americans) why I *ever* moved away from *Califoooornia*. And I don't know when, or how many times it took, but somehow the act of hearing people say they *loooove* California has since emerged as one of my biggest unusual turn-offs.[2]

I know it's weird and unnecessary, but hear me out, because the trouble I've had with people telling me they *loooove* California is mostly due to how the vast majority of these people have *Never. Even. Been. To. California*. And therein lies my point; it's not about if the state is worthy of its praise (because it probably is, for the most part), and it's certainly not about judging someone for lacking the means to have visited (because wtf, that would be heinous). Instead, it's about how milquetoasty [*sic*] we are for allowing popularity contests to dictate our preferences in the first place. (*What are we, in our early 20s?*)

So although it's totally fair game to love California (because *come on,* I'm not a complete psycho), I still can't help but imagine a tiny little Holden Caulfield popping out of nowhere and urging me to ask these people, "Oh, you *love* California? In that case do you *also* love Starbucks, Vans, iPhones and iPhone XLs, Drake, Ray-Bans, Kombucha, denim jackets, Netflix, the idea of going backpacking, Converse All-Stars, Chipotle, the word *hella,* craft IPAs, Game of Thrones, Coachella, shirts that say *Supreme* on them, the poor man's knockoff versions of those shirts that say *Levi's* instead, Siracha, true crime documentaries, true crime podcasts, brunch, talking about Blockchain, Disney classics, Balenciagas, saying you do yoga but never actually doing yoga, books about not giving a fuck, and adding guacamole to things?"

I think it goes without saying that the above has always literally gone without saying. I mean, sure, all of those 'personal' interests easily could have been generated by a computer program, but I don't berate people to their faces like an angsty teenage iconoclast. Instead, now I come at them from the side like an angsty *late* 20s iconoclast (*plot twist*), saying things like "Hey, did you know that it's *illegal* to have open alcoholic beverages at the beach in *Califoooornia*?" And that can be pretty world-shattering for folks who are from countries that condone open containers. (*Just kidding, it doesn't change how they feel about California at all.*)

Nevertheless, since I hear that the final stage of early-adulthood rebellion is

growing up and leaving your insolent daydreams behind, it's only right for me to backpedal a little bit and point out some of the storytelling tropes that got us here. Here's what I mean:

For starters, that big list of 'phony' interests from earlier was just a cheap compilation of a fairly self-explanatory trope known as, '*It's Popular, Now It Sucks*.' Everything on that list was mildly nice, innocent, and reasonably accessible on its own, yet somehow becoming super popular added a little *pumpkin spice* to them. And even though all of those 'basic bitch' things probably earned their reputations on actual merit, this tiny detail only serves as a distraction from the more important fact that they're too well-liked, ergo they suck. *Duhh*.

Case study: In-N-Out Burger. (*No pitchforks please, this is just going to be a thought exercise.*)

Consider the following hypothesis: In-N-Out is overrated, and all of the worship it gets is merely due to its location exclusivity in California (plus a couple one-off cities, I guess). If In-N-Out were prevalent everywhere else like many other comparable chains, people (*especially visiting tourists*) wouldn't go nearly as often and it wouldn't be nearly as glorified. As such, it exists today as a wildly popular exploit for people to show off (on social media) that they're in California—plain, simple, and irrespective of the food.

That's why In-N-Out sucks in this scenario; not because of its quality, or its taste, or its value for the price. It sucks because it's simply *capable* of being identified by scoffers as '*Low-IQ trash with no soul*.' (This is another trope, which focuses on the 'Lowest Common Denominator' type of criticism.) In short, due to how In-N-Out is devoid of anything and everything that *might* have skewed its appeal towards a more niche group of people—*or even just a more/less sophisticated class*—it's therefore made to appeal to everyone, and that's clearly too many people.

As a result, the objection that none of this has anything to do with the food turns out to be just another irrelevancy (similar to how french fries that turn out to be cardboard after two minutes are somehow irrelevant to Stans of In-N-Out because "*oMg aNimAL sTyLE*"). And meanwhile, the great burger-joint debate rages on with people arguing over portion sizes and secret menu items, when clearly it's never been about that. It's those damn conformists! (*Wait, hold on, I can do better: iT'S tHOse dAMn COnfoRMisTs!*)

Jokes aside, I actually don't mind In-N-Out, and due to how hating popular things doesn't make a person more or less interesting anyway, I feel a bit compelled to make a hypocrisy nod (which is a trope I've definitely brought up in the past) and own up to that time I ragged on the 'go sportsball' crowd for the exact same thing over not liking sports, two whole chapters ago. I mean, I bet it *is* really effing annoying to go to a bar without knowing that the entire place will turn into a shitshow once some big game starts—and yet, *I'm* allowed to be an impossible killjoy whenever I want, but they aren't? That's so *Confederacy of Dunces* of me. (*At least Ignatius was like, 30 years old in that book.*)

If it's any consolation, though, I do see that the hot new thing going around is simply to let people enjoy things they like (even if they like putting up Christmas decorations before the end of October). At the same time, however, in order for such moral high ground to work, doesn't it have to be a two-way street? Like, you gotta let haters hate, too, right? Of course, that has its own consequences, but in some of those cases there's a juicy payoff for the observer. (*And guess what: this is one of those cases.*)

Do you remember back in Chapter 9 when I was blathering on and on about how I was starting to resent the part of traveling where someone I don't know asks me what country I'm from as a way of initiating conversation (*because that's oftentimes been code for "I'm guessing you're from the US and I've been dying to talk shit about American politics*")? Well, in almost all of those situations since then, I've also started telling people that I'm originally from California

myself. (*Lol, let me finish*.) Hypocrisy ~~nods~~ headbangs aside, not only is it the last US state I actually lived in, but given its glowing reputation, it's also the answer I assumed would generate the least unprompted ridicule. Now, as it turns out, I was exactly right about that, but unfortunately it worked so well that it also backfired.

"Wait, you're from *Califoooornia*? Omg, I *loooove* California!"

I recognize the dramatic irony here must be oh so satisfying, but seriously, I'm starting to question my own foothold in reality if my breaking point is people telling me they love the state I lied about being from. The good news is that my California ID expires in less than a year, which means I won't be able ~~to play the victim card~~ to prove that I'm 'from' there anymore. And who knows, maybe I'll have gotten over myself by then. Can I count on your support so we can finally move on?

Moving on, earlier this week I was catching up with one of my favorite friends to go traveling with, and when she asked me how my spur-of-the-moment, 12-hour mini trip to Budapest last month went, I told her it was 'the best day ever.'[3]

So first of all, I was *not* planning to be in Budapest that day, but sometimes a minor inconvenience works out in your favor. Sometimes you get lucky. Sometimes everything comes together in one big fat stack of awesome. This just happened to be one of those days, and despite not hitting the slopes, the links, or the coast, it really *was* the best day ever.

(In order to explain why, I need to go over a bit of background info.)

One of the longest standing facts of life (aka my life) is that efficiency is satisfying, *especially* when it's unexpected. We love it when we happen to be carrying exact change for something. We love it when we grab a stack of napkins to set the table and it ends up being the right amount on the first try. We love it when we're picking up a friend at the airport and we time our drive so perfectly that we swing through the terminal at the exact moment our friend is exiting through the sliding doors.

Note: I'm definitely toeing the line here (and getting myself confused) when it comes to the differences between efficiency, synchronicity, irony, and merely planned coincidence.[4] Nevertheless, the point is that I'm often guilty of trying to force these kinds of moments to happen anyway, if only for the odd and/or sweet satisfaction they bring. For example, whenever I'm about to hop on the subway in a city that I'm very familiar with, I like to calculate which specific carriage would be the best one for me to stand in based on its position relative to the exit that I'll ultimately be taking at my arrival station. Is that relatable? The absolute best thing ever is when you show up to the platform just as the doors are making their sound that means they're about to close, so then you get on in a hurry, but now you're in the wrong carriage based on your exit strategy—*and you only have so many stops before your eventual destination, and you can't just walk through the inside of the carriages because it's not that kind of train*—so you decide to pop off at the next stop just so you can pop back on in the next carriage down, and then you repeat this process at each stop until finally you've reached the optimal carriage for you to be in with no time to spare because your stop is up next. Feels amazing, right? (*Please say yes*.)

Anyway, that kind of thing is not just a mundane victory in your everyday life. *Well actually, in every sense of it, yes it is…* but it's also what I like to call, a drop dead, stone cold, rock hard, *efficiency boner*. (Which is just a shitty derivative of the 'nerd boner' concept, honestly, but I didn't know what else to call it. Also, I don't really get a boner when these types of things happen. I do *totally* get off on them, however. *Figuratively*.)

Okay, so with that in mind, here's my Budapest story. I hope you're as unusually turned on as I am.

It was a Saturday afternoon at the ~~Shithole~~ Schiphol airport in Amsterdam, and I was supposedly heading home to catch up on sleep after a whirlwind stretch of five flights in six days.[5] About an hour before boarding time, they announced some kind of medical emergency related to our upcoming flight. I can't remember what it was exactly, but they had asked for a few volunteers to give up their seats in exchange for airline compensation or something. Now, first of all, I'm almost *never* at the gate an entire hour before boarding time, so the fact that I was even there for this was unlikely in itself. Second of all, I also didn't have anywhere that I *had* to be that night, so long story long, I did not end up on the plane to Berlin. Next, during my whole 'what do I do now' phase that came shortly afterwards, I found myself chatting with an off-duty Berlin-based pilot who had hung back as well. Naturally, we resorted to looking up Berlin-bound train tickets, and he quickly pulled the trigger on one of the only non-transfer options left, which would arrive in Berlin sometime in the wee hours of the morning, for something like €130.

Now, considering how that's worth at least three or four flights to me, I was *not* about to shell out the extra cash just to inconvenience myself with a 6-hour choo choo ride when I wouldn't even be arriving home until the next morning no matter what. Thus, since I was already at the airport (and not very keen on arranging another night in Amsterdam just to come back the next day), I did what anyone in my shoes would do. I looked up flights.

This is where it gets good.

After frantically searching for *any* cheap itinerary that could get me out of Amsterdam for the night and back to Berlin the next day, I settled upon Budapest. However, something useful to remember about airline ticketing is that most companies are (naturally) against the idea of people buying flights that they

wouldn't be able to arrive at the gate in time for, so many (if not most) booking websites will close the online buying window exactly two hours in advance of a given flight time. (Your *air* mileage may vary.)

At exactly 2:59pm (according to my email confirmation), I booked a ticket on the flight set to depart for Budapest at 5:02pm—a whole three minutes before the buying window closed.

That right there, ladies and gentlemen, is efficiency boner number one.

I purchased my return flight at 3:12pm, and then I awkwardly went backwards through security, seeing as that was the only way I could leave the terminal to check in for my new flight. (The system would have treated me as a no-show if I hadn't scanned my new boarding pass at the entrance to security.) Later on at the gate, given how last-minute everything was, I quickly booked a hostel for the night on my phone. I also made sure to do my little magic trick of paying a bit more for whatever tier of shared rooms was one or two tiers above the lowest available tier, because any other last-minute bookers would probably be choosing those rooms, while my fancy-ass would be paying €2 extra in hopes of ending up with a room to myself. (It still came out to €13 because Budapest is a god-damned steal.) I made that booking at 3:46pm.

When I finally boarded the plane, the seat I had strategically chosen during that second check-in process turned out just as I had hoped: the main cabin door was closed, and I was sitting in my own row. *Boner number two.*

A nearby flight attendant noticed my excitement. *No, not by looking at my crotch.* Instead, he recognized my advanced tactics of moving to the middle seat and putting my stuff on the window seat. This is a pro strat for maintaining your own-row because it discourages other people from availing themselves of the

otherwise free aisle seat. It works because the window seat *looks* like it's occupied (by a passenger who is in the bathroom or still roaming around the cabin looking for overhead storage space), and the aisle seat is no longer appealing because there wouldn't be an empty middle seat as a buffer of personal space. (*Look, it might be a dick move, but hey, everyone on the plane has an assigned seat, and I just as easily could've been on my original flight or a stupid choo choo at this point, so don't ruin this for me*.)

So anyway, the flight attendant witnessed all of this nonsense, immediately knew what I was doing, and then he made a comment to make sure I was going to wait until after take-off before lying down across my row to fall asleep. (*What is this, my first rodeo?*) Naturally, because my guy game is good, I quickly befriended him and he ended up giving me a bunch of extra snacks and tea later on. (Btw, I'm not implying that I hit on him or anything when I say my guy game is strong, I just wanted to emphasize that my girl game is weak; there's no way I'd pull this off with a girl because I don't shoot my shots. Also, the guy was straight, in case that matters for whatever narrative you've decided to invent here, so he wasn't trying to hit on me either. He was also quite good-looking. He'd probably look great in a romper.)

When I finally arrived in Budapest, I hopped on the bus and headed straight to my hostel. Right off the bat, the guy at the check-in counter told me that I had the whole shared room to myself. *Excuse me, did you say boner?*

So there I was, in Budapest on a Saturday night, with no plans. "I guess that means I'm going out."

I headed down to the lobby to see who was around, and I found three solo travelers mingling on the couches and watching European football. As luck would have it, they were the exact nationality you'd hope to find in such a situation: Australian. (Good lord do the Aussies travel hard. Like, some folks party while traveling, but the Aussies travel while partying.)

So again, *guy game strong*, since none of them had ever been to Budapest before, I worked it out that I'd take them to one of those big-ass pubs they have inside of these famously old, ramshackley [*sic*] buildings. Fortunately, I had been to a few of these places during my last (and first) trip to Budapest, but before that I didn't even know what the 'ruin pubs' were. In fact, to this day my buddy who was with me during that trip still makes fun of me for our messaging history from beforehand:

Me: "Hey dude, what do you want to do in Budapest?"

Him: "Ruin bars."

Me: "Hell yeah, let's wreck 'em."

So anyway, the Australians agreed, and before we left I also suggested (weirdly) that we should all refer to each other by the name 'Larry' for the rest of the night, since remembering our actual names would be next to useless, seeing as we were all going our separate ways in a day or so anyway. And at first they were like, "This guy is weird," but then they warmed up to the idea. (I guess it was a change of pace from calling each other the c-word like they do back in 'Straya, perhaps?)

We got to the bar and it quickly turned out to be a really fun time. There were a lot of "Hey Larry, I saved you a seat" jokes going around, and those were secretly my favorite part.

"Thanks Larry, but where's Larry?"

"You mean Larry? He's getting another drink at the bar with Larry."

"Ahhh. Classic Larry."

Eventually, the other Larrys began talking about extending the night by going to a club until the morning, and that's about the time when *this* Larry had to bid farewell because of his 9am flight to Berlin (and his lack of being in his early 20s).

I woke up the next morning wide awake exactly two minutes before my alarm was set to go off.[6] In the middle of showering (but before being fully awake), I realized that although I had a change of clothes with me, I didn't have a towel, since I didn't need to bring my own on my trip to Amsterdam. Sure enough, in the *one* little cupboard under the sink, there was *one* neatly folded hand towel in a basket that could work. (If you're grossed out by this, you're wrong. It was in a basket. You *know* it's fresh if it's in a basket. I'll have you know I butt-flossed with it just to prove this exact point. Also, *boner*.)

I got dressed and finished getting my bags ready, realizing I had just put on my last clean shirt from Amsterdam in addition to the standard extra pair of socks and underwear that I *always* pack for reasons explained in my *vade mecum* of travel tips (aka Chapter 14). I was certainly running a risk at this point (according to that), but it was worth it for the added satisfaction of having packed the perfect amount of everything.

I checked out of the hostel a bit before 7am, and I shit you not, no more than two

steps after swinging my duffel bag onto my shoulder and closing the door behind me, a trio of hammered Larrys came stumbling around the corner. At the very sight of me, they immediately blurted out "Larry!" in shitfaced unison, and then they all came barrelling over to hug me goodbye. It was an unbelievable scene. If I could've shed a tear without ~~getting a boner~~ it being weird, I would have.

The story does not stop there.

Shortly after deplaning in Berlin, I checked my phone and saw that the bus to get me home was leaving soon AF—and since there's absolutely nothing worse than having to wait around for the next one when all you want to do is get home, I started hoofing it. The bus was already posted up by the time I got to its stop, and that meant I only had like ten or so seconds to get my ass on it. Unfortunately, there was also a beefy line at the ticketing machine, and I couldn't just get on the bus without a ticket, because (A) this is Germany we're talking about, and (B) another long-standing fact of (my) life is that one of those random ticket checkers disguised in street clothes is present on exactly one half of my public transit rides, despite how the majority of my Berliner friends go *months* without seeing one.

With no time to waste (and probably eight seconds left), I checked my wallet, and sure enough, there was a single unpunched bus ticket in there, all ready to go. *Of course there was.* I had bought it two days earlier from that exact ticketing machine when I originally arrived at the airport for my outbound flight to Amsterdam, all for this exact situation. (And btw, that was the flight on which I finished writing Chapter 14 about all my travel hacks, so there was absolutely no doubt that I had the spare ticket with me.)

I'm not even mad that there wasn't a ticket-fairy on the bus this time, because it would have been very uncomfortable for all the passengers involved, on account of my giant *~~planned coincidence~~ boner*.

Lastly, and I forgot to mention this earlier, but because I was originally supposed to be home the night before, the only thing I had with me to charge my phone was a power bank (for which I also did not bring a charger). I probably don't even need to say it at this point, but this turned out to be damn near perfect anyway, since I was only a few stops away from home by the time my phone (and power bank) finally ran out of juice on the bus. Before it did, however, I decided to use its last few drops to check my banking app to see how much damage I did on the trip. Lo and behold, I spent a total of €96.52 for everything: the flights, the hostel, the bus tickets to and from both airports (including this one I had pre-bought), whatever food I ate at '*Pizza SI,*' the beers at the pub, all of it—and it was *still* cheaper than taking the choo choo from Amsterdam to Berlin. *Call a doctor immediately if you or a loved one ever experiences such a boner.*

When I got home from this wild ride, I didn't even plug my phone in before falling asleep.

So yeah, that was my best day ever; one thing after another, it just seemed like everything was coming up Milhouse. I'm not even sure if that day was full of things I could control, or full of things I could only hope to optimize. Either way, it still feels good to pretend that I personally engineered all of it. And honestly, considering how everything about it was all so satisfyingly efficient, now that I look back on it, the only thing I can think about is how dreadfully inefficient this attempt at retelling that story was.

Can't win 'em all, I guess.

…

I wrote this on flights from Berlin to Manchester and Manchester to Marrakech,

18 July 2018

XXX

1. Assuming that those are pretty much the only three states with flags you'll typically see outside of their respective states. (License plates don't count.) For real though, try an online Sporcle quiz for the state flags and see if you can name ten of the remaining 47 (minus states you've lived in). When that's too hard, try five. ↑

2. Quick tangent, but imagine there's this matrix which consists of four quadrants: usual turn ons, unusual turn-ons, usual turn-offs, and unusual turn-offs. Now, obviously 'usual' in this case refers to the more garden variety turn-ons and turn-offs, such as prolonged eye contact and tobacco smoke (respectively). Then there's also the 'unusual' kind, which are far less generic and can oftentimes exist in only one individual. In my case, for example, an unusual turn-on might be how I find rompers to be super attractive for some reason. (Do whatever you want with that information, but also know that this matrix has like, nothing to do with sexual kinks or whatever. I mean, I wouldn't get hornier in the bedroom if a girl wore a romper and told me she hated California. *At least I don't think so*.) ↑

3. You know, I was trying to make a nice and tidy intro circle about 'the best day ever,' it just got out of hand and took way longer than I expected. But you know what else? I think it's better this way, because now things might actually resemble the aimless, helter-skelter experience of traveling *way too much* that I've been hoping to imitate, replicate, and share all along. That's the whole point, you know? ~~Being meta.~~ It's *supposed* to be flighty, pun intended. (That said, traveling *way too much* has also been extremely satisfying a lot of the time, too, so I'm hoping I can recreate and share some of that feeling as well.) ↑

4. Here's how it works, though: Efficiency would be like having just enough juice in your phone so that you can go two days without having to charge it. Coincidence would be like a couple guys named Larry meeting each other for the first time and discovering that they all have the same name (because that's generally interpreted as an improbable chance). Synchronicity would be like seeing a billboard with the last name of a friend you haven't talked to in a while and then receiving a call from them out of the blue later that day (because that's generally interpreted as a sign from above or whatever, as if the universe were trying to tell you something). Irony would be like me not giving an example for it. ↑

5. See, what had happened was, I was in Tel Aviv when an old friend of mine messaged me saying he was not only going to be visiting Europe the following week, but also that he was in fact already in Lisbon. *Some friend*. Still, there was no question I'd make the effort to see him, but I also had my trip to Amsterdam coming up, so it needed to be fast (and affordable). In the end, the only way to get it all done in time was to fly straight to Lisbon the day after getting back from Tel Aviv, spend two and a half days there, and then fly to Luxembourg for 36 hours before returning to Berlin for my OG flight to Amsterdam the following day. All things considered, due to a relatively recent airline shakeup that created a ton of introductory (aka dirt cheap) routes involving Berlin and Luxembourg, those three additional flights didn't even set me back €70. (PS, the Amsterdam airport is not really a shithole but that nickname is too low-hanging to pass up.) ↑

6. This started happening to me a bit more frequently about two months ago, but then it started happening *every* day that I was flying somewhere, no matter what time I set my alarm. I wouldn't have believed it either, but then I learned about how the body has a protein called PER1 that determines when we wake up, and the reason why people with regular routines often wake up just before their alarms is because the body is preparing itself for the stress that the alarm causes. I guess my body doesn't want me missing flights, despite my mind's best efforts. Circadian rhythms are weird, man. ↑

Chapter 19: Pigeon People

Have you ever thought about the idea that if we ever stopped meeting new people, at some point we'd eventually have no friends? I guess that's a twisted way of putting it, but I think we sometimes overestimate how the whole "keeping in touch" thing works altogether. I mean, in terms of probability, the odds are that many of our current close friends won't be as close to us in five years time, and when it comes to the ones we *do* manage to hang onto, can we ever know for sure that we'll still be in touch with *any* of them five years after that?

We like to pretend that technology can take care of these things for us, but that's like saying we'll exercise more when we move into an apartment building that has a gym in it; just because we have the tools at our disposal doesn't mean we use them appropriately (or that they're even the right ones for the job). And since 99 percent of social media these days has turned into some variation of self-broadcasting to followers or subscribers, there's not even an online concept of 'friends' anymore (no matter what any platform wants to call it). As a result, people are reduced to being mere spectators who keep tabs on each other by tapping and scrolling—and all *that* does is offer a sociological safety net for pretending like we aren't up to date on each other whenever it's convenient for us in direct conversations. At the end of the day, whether online or off, we still need to make non-passive efforts if we want our friendships to maintain a pulse, and we can only "pick things up right where we left off" so many times before it eventually fizzles out.

Personally, considering how often I've bounced around over the years, I sometimes look back and find myself with a strained feeling of having to choose which people I want to keep in touch with after moving away from someplace. It's like I'm some high school gym teacher who got roped into coaching the varsity soccer team and then had to make roster cuts the very next day. And I guess that sounds like I'm playing god with my friends or whatever, but I think

it's something much more modest: I'm trying to avoid being no more than a temporary friend to all of them myself.

The thing is, every time that you move to another time zone and/or country and/or continent, that comes with a change to the tune of something like 98 percent in terms of the people you interact with on a day-to-day basis. On the flipside, the only thing that changes in the lives of the people you end up leaving behind is that 2 percent difference when only one of their friends disappears. After that, it doesn't take long for the old "out of sight, out of mind" proverb to rear its head—and that's nobody's fault, it's just that we're all replaceable.

But regardless of how everyone knows that the phone works both ways, the point I'm trying to make here is that the burden of keeping in touch (or at least the lion's share of it) undoubtedly falls on the friend who leaves. And sure, that's generally been me in nearly every case that I'd claim to care about, but I've also moved four times in the last ten years (with an average city-to-city move that's equivalent to the distance between New York City and Barcelona), so it's not like I've suddenly been blindsided by this realization. Nevertheless, that shouldn't stop me from ~~bellyaching about it~~ reflecting on it sometimes, and it doesn't. In fact, on one of my most recent flights, I went so far as to create a list of my closest friends sorted by location as a way of improving how I can keep track of the ones I haven't reached out to in a while. (*If you think that's weird, imagine if I had shared the list.*)

On a somewhat related note, there's a theory that stems out of early 90s anthropology and evolutionary psychology called *Dunbar's number*, and this suggests that there's a cognitive upper limit to the quantity of social relationships that our brains are capable of maintaining in a stable way (i.e., by knowing who each person is and also how everyone relates and/or doesn't relate to each other). Overall, while the average person is well-acquainted with roughly 600 people and can recognize up to 1,500 people on sight, Dunbar's research concluded that we can only handle a total of about 150 social relationships, and those consist of casual contacts (roughly 100 max), close friends (50 max), inner circle (~15),

and intimate relationships (~5).[1]

Over the years, Dunbar has revisited his research many times to address the notion of social media's impact on his original study, only to conclude (as recent as 2016) that the same results applied to online networks as well, because despite how technology makes it seem like we can pump those rookie numbers up, we're still held back by the constraints of both time and cognitive capital—but hey, it still *looks* nice to have thousands of online friends, doesn't it?

Nevertheless, as long as we're considering 150 to be the limit for social relationships (*and meanwhile the rest of the population is just background filler generated by the matrix to furnish our view of the woman in the red dress*), then I guess it makes sense how I can be on a plane right now with nearly 200 other people and not give a flying fuck about any of them (*save for maybe the woman in the red dress*). I mean, obviously I wouldn't go out of my way to wish harm upon these folks, but if I can be brutally callous for a second just to make a point, it's tough to see how my life would be affected in any way whatsoever if the aircraft carrying these people suddenly went down in flames and killed them all (*save for the fact that I'm also on it*).

The thing is, it's not like any one of the 1,500 people I'd supposedly recognize are on this plane anyway, so what's the *non-humanitarian* difference here? Isn't *that* the reason why tragedies that are farther and farther away from our own inner circles feel like just another news story sometimes? And besides, let's say I *tried* to put the entire team on my back by caring about all 200 of these people on a personal level; that's still *twice* the assumed maximum for casual contacts, so like, clearly my lumbar would be donebar (*pun intended*) and this economy class seat doesn't recline as it is.

Lower back jokes aside, I totally get that you can still care about the well-being of other people without having social relationships with them. (*I just really wanted to make that lame donebar joke, and that's how far I was evidently*

willing to go for it.) Nevertheless, no matter what our Dunbar number actually is, isn't it still true that we treat people outside of our personal network a lot differently than we treat those inside it even when everything else is equal?

For example, we could be driving on the highway getting all worked up over some road-raging idiot in the car behind us, however the moment we take a closer look and notice that this particular idiot is one of our friends, that frustration immediately switches to relieved excitement. It's like, for whatever probably sensible reason, our limited number of friends get a free pass, while everyone else can get bent. Then again, if we *weren't* limited in our capacity and therefore paid no mind to most of the terrible things people do (such as cutting people off in traffic, or never leaving online reviews for things, or breaking a whiskey glass *on my face*), then what else would this be about? Pigeons?

Well, actually yes, but only because of how clear it is to me that nobody (*not even our friends*) appreciates all of the nice things that pigeons do for humans—which is just another one of the terrible things that people do.

First of all, *holy shit*, the amount of hate crimes that people commit against pigeons is probably greater than the amount of hate crimes that people commit against people. Humans curse at pigeons, they call them names (like 'flying rats'), and they even swat and kick at them despite how they're just minding their own business. And why do humans do this? Because they've arbitrarily decided that pigeons are the lowest class in the entire animal kingdom, and I say that's total bullshit. I mean, please, even if that *were* true, I'd still have a hard time understanding how it would justify being absolutely wicked towards them. Be honest with me here, have you ever seen a pigeon (that wasn't on the internet) being treated with respect when it was accidentally in a human's way?

Second of all, think about what these birds do for a living: they literally clean up after us on the streets, *for free*, doing a lifetime of unpaid labor as courtesy garbagemen. Sure, they may not be very good at their jobs, but they also never

complain about them either; they just pop their heads in like waiters at a restaurant, saying, "Hey, are you done with that? Because I can get it out of the way for you if you'd like," and they're *happy* to do so. But nope. People can't even look at pigeons without scowling, let alone show an ounce of gratitude. If pigeons could talk, here's how a typical interaction with a human would probably go:

Pigeon: "Pardon me sir, I'm just cleaning up this entire beach and digging cigarette butts out of the sand for you, I hope I'm not getting in your line of sight. Also—and I really don't mean to impose—but would it perhaps be alright if I had some of that food you already dropped? A seagull came up and bullied me for my lunch money earlier."

Person: "No you filthy animal. Fuck off."

Me: "Wow, bitch. Why are you so hurtful?"

Side note: in case you didn't notice, I'd like to emphasize that it was *me* who jumped in up there and called the other person a bitch, not the pigeon. The pigeon would *never* say something like that. Furthermore, if you did in fact assume it *was* the pigeon at first, well then I hate to break it to you, but that wasn't just a careless mistake on your part. It was your own natural anti-pigeon related tendencies.

I honestly think there ought to be a full-length documentary on these truly altruistic, *gray*-collar, *flight*-of-the-mill, 'Joe Six-*Peck*' heroes of the bird community, but yeah right, that ain't gonna happen, and here's how I know: because a pigeon once made an appearance on BBC's *Planet Earth II* (which is basically the *Star Wars* franchise of nature documentaries), and do you know what it was doing? *It was getting fucking eaten in the season fucking finale by a*

giant motherfucking catfish. I'm not even kidding; it happens around three-quarters of the way through the episode as well, which means the effective *climax* of the season finale is a pigeon getting mauled—because *that's* what the people aka pigeon haters want.

The disrespect is absolutely next-level, and I'm just getting started here. People even get mad at pigeons for hanging around public transportation hubs and trying to board trains every now and then (which they do *politely* by walking instead of flying, mind you). It's like, damn, if you worked for free all day every day and then had to fly your own ass home seven days a week, wouldn't you feel like you deserved to take the train sometimes? Damn.

I'll tell you one thing though, I bet people would let more pigeons on the train if they were those *white* ones we like to call 'doves' instead. Here's an idea: do you want to know the actual scientific difference between doves and pigeons? Well I'm sorry but you can't because there isn't one. Taxonomically it's the same bird; the only difference is that the English language adopted both words ('dove' and 'pigeon') from two separate origin languages, and then people needlessly decided to apply new distinctions based solely on their appearances. You'd think maybe we'd have learned better as a society by now, having made that fuckup a few million times. I mean, shit, we can mess around and exaggerate about discrimination against birds, but the fact that we haven't been able to draw the line at people yet is beyond me.

Speaking of certain societies turning a blind eye to something problematic, can you believe how quickly the US forgot about the 200,000 pigeons it had during WWII for things like, *oh I don't know, maybe delivering life-saving messages*? Do you think the prissy-ass doves ever did that? I doubt it, because why would the bougie birds in powdery white wigs need to do it if there were lower class pigeons to do it for them? And now you're telling me that those very same draft-dodging doves get to perform at weddings and baseball games every day while pigeons are left to clean up after the show? I call bullshit—and don't even try to say that it's because doves are 'beautiful' or something. We change beauty

standards according to whatever we decide them to be, and that could just as easily include those charming iridescent greens and purples found on a common pigeon's neck, so get real.

Look, clearly I have enough pigeon content to go on all day here, but clearly my feathers are ruffled enough as it is.

What's that? You want more pigeon content?

Okay fine, but this is the last one:

Did you know that 'rock dove' used to be an officially recognized term for what we now refer to as the pigeon? It's true, however, all of that came to an end when the American Ornithological Society decided to mimic a similar change made by the British Ornithologists' Union in 2002. Furthermore, just 25 days ago (ATOW), the American Ornithological Society released a supplement to its *Check-list of North American Birds* publication, which includes news regarding several decisions made by what's called the Committee on Classification and Nomenclature. And believe it or not, for the first time in 16 years, one of those decisions had to do with a proposed reversal to the original pigeon ruling that would reinstate the 'rock dove' terminology. Of course, the committee struck down the proposal by a vote of 5–4, with one abstention from an obvious pigeon-hater. (*Lol, did you think this had a happy ending for the pigeon? Get real.*)

Alright, I hope you get the idea that we've been shockingly unappreciative towards pigeons in my ~~opigeon~~ opinion, and I don't think there's a single non-extinct bird we've ever done as dirty, except for perhaps the chicken. (*I promise I'll only give one piece of chicken content.*) For example, despite how it might be a bit unusual, have you ever come across a culinary dish (such as a salad or

maybe an omelet) that had both grilled chicken *and* eggs in it? (*See where this is going?*) It's like, "Not only am I going to eat you, my dear chicken, but I'm also going to eat your unborn children alongside you."

That's totally vicious, right? Oddly enough, this actually makes for an interesting parallel with what I consider to be the most wholesome moment in sports history because it also happens to be the most savage:

On September 14, 1990, the Seattle Mariners baseball team was facing the California Angels in the top of the 1st inning. With no outs and a Mariners runner on 1st base, a 40-year-old left fielder named Ken Griffey hit a home run. The next batter up was a 20-year-old center fielder named Ken Griffey Jr., and he proceeded to hit a home run as well, making the pair of Griffeys the first and only father-son combination to hit back-to-back home runs in MLB history. Again, see where this is going?

Griffey Sr.: "Not only am I going to hit a bomb off of this pitcher, but the figurative fruit of my literal loins is going to hit one off of him immediately afterward."

Crazy, right? Even if you don't like baseball, you can still appreciate the concept of a double-generational pimp slap for being hilarious on its own (*because it is*), and for baseball fans it's even better.[2]

Anyway, getting back to the pun-intended pecking order of things people treat like scum, I'd like to skip a few steps and turn to the closest form of human that gets treated like pigeons, which is tourists, and I'm not just saying that because I'm a big traveler myself. (If anything that helps me steer clear of whatever negativity is out there because—*famous last words, but*—I know what I'm doing.) Instead, it's the untrained travelers who get looked down upon like

they're nothing more than obstruent riffraff, and they don't deserve that.

For starters, it doesn't even make sense for someone to complain about tourists when virtually *everyone* (including the person complaining) becomes a tourist the moment they step foot outside their country of origin and/or residence. I mean, isn't that the same otiose logic we use when we grumble about being stuck in traffic—*while literally sitting in that same traffic being an equal part of it*? At the end of the day, anybody can *be* a tourist, but nobody *is* one. (So like, unless you think that everyone should stay in their own hometowns for all eternity, then what's the big deal here?)

In any case, the stigma against tourists still exists, and we *know* it exists because it often makes people feel the imaginary need to 'blend in' with the locals, *or worse,* it makes people delude themselves into thinking that they're not tourists at all by saying shit like, "Yeah, I travel a lot but I'm not a tourist because I don't do touristy things." Umm, okay hotshot, not only are you lying to yourself (because you undoubtedly *are* a tourist), but you're also the worst kind of tourist for thinking you're better than everyone else.

Seriously, there's nothing wrong with doing touristy things if you like doing touristy things, and unless you own a helicopter, you're not going to be quote-unquote "better" at visiting a city just because you do quote-unquote "off-the-beaten-path" things. I mean, congrats on *not* seeing Michelangelo's David while you were in Florence; that's only a work of art known for being so transcendent in beauty and technique that the founding father of art history (aka Giorgio Vasari) said that you won't need to bother seeing another sculpture for as long as you live. Shit, I can't wait to feast my eyes on that giant marble ~~nutsack~~ masterpiece someday when I visit Florence, so thanks for not getting in my way.

Side note: I should probably concede the point that many travelers prefer to hide the fact that they're tourists as a means of minimizing unwanted confrontations and/or avoiding being the target of scams. I guess that's a reasonable excuse, but

I will also say that some of my most memorable travel experiences have all come when I've embraced the role of a bumbling tourist instead. (*Because when everyone else is pretending to blend in, that leaves more of the spotlight for me, right?*) That said, oh boy did I get a lot of attention this week when I was in Morocco visiting Africa for my first time. Allow me to tell you all about it:

So in the medina (aka old city quarter) of Marrakesh, there's a buzzing marketplace called Jemaa el-Fnaa, and that's probably *the* place to go if you're looking for constant reminders that you're ~~an over privileged white person~~ a gullible tourist. In fact, after just a few days of popping in and out of the marketplace myself, I was convinced that there had not been a single local I talked to that hadn't (A) told me to come eat at their restaurant or food stand, (B) invited me to come buy merchandise in their shop, (C) offered to sell me drugs, or (D) asked me outright to give them money. All things considered, it was a fascinating environment, and you can imagine the spectacle I had the pleasure of witnessing at one point when a few über-tourists arrived while wearing socks and sandals, because if they so much as *looked* at an item in a shop, street vendors from all over creation would ~~flock to them like pigeons~~ swarm at them like bees.

Okay, ready for the part where Toto realizes he's not in Kansas anymore?

Well, three days ago (while I was still in Marrakech, of course) I went to check out a touristy place called Jardin Majorelle, a botanical garden that's famous for its cobalt blue villa and museum of Berber culture. On my way back to my riad (aka Moroccan guest-house), there was a middle-aged man who was walking next to me perfectly stride-for-stride for what quickly became an uncomfortably long period of time. My guard was slightly up at first, but he seemed friendly and we started talking to cut the awkward tension. His name was Ali, he spoke Arabic and no English, but he also lived in Spain once, so we settled upon Spanish for communicating. As expected, he asked me the dreaded question of where I'm from, but since I was still unsure of the situation, I answered with Brazil (*you know, for street cred*) and that proved to be believable because of my

habit of always allowing Portuguese words to slip out *sem querer* ('accidentally') whenever I'm *hablando español* anyway.

So we walked and talked, and eventually Ali got it out of me that I was on my way to find a place to eat a traditional Moroccan dish called *tajine*. Now, since we were already going in the same direction (and he *conveniently* knew of a good tajine place), he offered to give me a ride. I wasn't quite sure if I misunderstood him at first, but when we got to the next street, he went straight over to a parked motorcycle, pulled out some keys from his pocket, pointed at a spare helmet on the back, and then he turned to me as if to say, "Hurry boy, it's waiting there for you."

And look, even though I'm a dumb tourist, I'm also *not* a dumb tourist. I knew that, and he knew that. Hell, I had only met this guy 15 minutes ago, and obviously my guard was way the fuck up, so do you *really* think I got on the back of this dude's motorcycle?

You're damn right I did.

Ali fired up the hog and we took off. In a few minutes, we approached a restaurant that I recognized from my walk earlier, so it was indeed on my route home, and it indeed served up a mean *tajine*. Ali said he wasn't hungry, but he stuck around to see if I wanted to go to a street market that I had coincidentally already read about (and starred on the map in my phone), offering me another ride. I didn't give a straight answer, but as I was eating I got to thinking about how this guy was a local who hadn't yet done any of the A, B, C, or D things from earlier, so I offered to buy him a drink from the fridge before I paid my tab. He declined.

Next, we hopped on the bike and headed towards the market. As we neared, Ali

started taking us down some alleyways that even Waze wouldn't tell you to drive down. Suddenly my guard went from six to midnight, and I even started to think that maybe it was already too late. I hollered into the earhole of Ali's helmet that I knew something wasn't right. He said everything was fine, and that this was a shortcut, and we kept going. We ended up stopping on a side road just beyond a half-deserted square, and a weird old man came out of a doorway that Ali gestured for me to go into.

Naturally, considering how this guy looked *exactly* like the old prisoner from Aladdin who turned out to be Jafar in disguise, my immediate thoughts included things like, "Well shit, *this* is how I die," and "Sorry mom, I done goofed my last goof," and of course, "Oh fuck, I haven't reached 100 flights yet!" *Classic*.

So now I'm in this weird-ass place that only half-resembles a textiles shop, and I could already feel my kidneys tensing up. The old man actually spoke a bit of English, so he started making small talk while showing me some silk scarves and carpets and other crap that he was selling. Surely this was a distraction for the organ harvesting operation in the back.

To buy myself some time, I feigned interest and asked him to tell me the prices of several identical items, which was even more redundant because I already knew what most things would roughly cost (because *duhhh*, I checked Wikitravel before going to Jemaa el-Fnaa). I obviously didn't want to buy anything from the old man, and he obviously offered me items at scammy tourist prices, but when I looked around and realized that Ali was nowhere to be found, I obviously concluded that I had better try to buy something before Jafar gave me my eternal reward. At the same time, however, since a big part of the tourist experience is haggling over the price, I made sure to put up a fight. (*I mean, sure, I may die here, but I still gotta get a good deal, am I right?* Just kidding.)

I eventually agreed to buy a pair of slippers for 100 dirham, which was roughly double the normal street price, and it was all the dirham I had on me anyway.

Nevertheless, despite getting ripped off, it ended up being a wise choice because the bigger and much younger man (*who was blocking the only exit doorway this whole time, by the way*) had to retrieve the slippers down off the wall, and that gave me a clear path to the door, which I didn't hesitate to bolt through, slippers in hand.

I finally stopped running when I got to the other side of the half-deserted square, and I headed straight towards a clearing I saw with cars and people in the distance. By the time I got there, however, who else but Ali had caught up to me. This dude had the nerve to ask me where I was going now, and when I said I was in a hurry to meet a friend, he offered me another ride. (*What a nice guy!*) I declined profusely, and eventually he accepted my very public farewell—but not before asking me for *un regalo de Brasil*, aka 'a gift from Brazil.' (*Hijo de puta, I knew it!*) I immediately tried the ol' gift of a handshake, but when that didn't work I gave him some loose Euro coins that I found at the bottom of my bag. Next, I peaced the hell out of there, thankful to have only died on the inside *figuratively*.

…

Alright look, I know I got caught slipping this time. There's no denying that. Still, despite my complacency, you can't entirely blame me for my dumb touristy actions back there; all I really did was place my trust in a stranger, and that's exactly what you're supposed to do when you're trying to pump up your Dunbar number. I mean, if I don't put in the effort, I'm going to end up with no friends just like that pigeon lady from Home Alone 2 (before her redemption arc), and I always thought she was way scarier than Harry and Marv (aka the Wet Bandits, aka the Sticky Bandits) ever were.

So despite how I'll never know for sure what would've happened if I hadn't escaped Jafar's cave of wonders, there are a few things of which I *am* sure: I'm sure that I can still learn a few more lessons even after 99 flights, I'm sure that

we should try to call our long-distance friends a lot more often, and lastly, as sure as Kilimanjaro rises like Olympus above the Serengeti, I'm sure that my mother will be relieved to know the following:

…

I wrote this on a flight from Marrakech to Milan, 22 July 2018.

XXX

1. Please don't be a dweeb here by adding up all of the individual maximums to 170 (as if they were independent of each other), because then we'd both be dweebs because I already tried that at first myself and got confused. ↑

2. When Ken Griffey Sr. hit that first home run, he did so when the count was 0-2, which is the second most uncommon count for a batter to hit a home run in the history of baseball (i.e., roughly three percent of all home runs each year are hit with an 0-2 count). Next, when Ken Griffey Jr. hit the second home run, he did so on a 3-0 count, which, *you guessed it*, is the *single most uncommon count* for a batter to hit a home run in baseball history (i.e., *half of one percent* of all home runs each year). Furthermore, since many MLB players go their *entire careers* without swinging at a *single* 3-0 pitch, the fact that this sequence occurred is nothing short of batshit insanity. ↑

Chapter 20: Triple Digits

Well, this is the one. At long last, I've made it to 100 flights in a year.

I've been looking forward to this day for a while now, and I gotta tell ya, it's been pretty underwhelming so far, lol. Granted, on the inside, I *do* feel like Frodo at the end of his quest in *The Lord of the Rings*, but on the outside, there doesn't seem to be much going on right now.

For starters, it's not like I'm sitting here with balloons or anything, so nobody else on the plane even knows about it (*assuming they'd care*). I also don't know what I was expecting (*assuming there'd be anything to expect*), but it still would've been sweet if I had lucked into my own row or something like that.

I suppose if I had stopped by the cockpit during the boarding process to say something cringey, like, "Hey guys, I just wanted to say thank you because this is my umpteenth flight in a year," then I might have won myself a "Cool, me too" from a pilot, or even a pat on the back. And who knows, maybe in a perfect world I could've also scored a set of those little plastic wings that children would get back in the days when it was still okay to refer to flight attendants as *stewards* and *stewardesses* but no longer okay to hit your kids for misbehaving during the flight.

Erm, anyway, despite how nothing extraordinary happens when you reach the altogether very satisfying triple digit number of flights in a year, I think the bigger question here is whether or not I've gained any notable insight now that I've done it myself.

Do I think so? Yes.

Do I know what it is yet? Not quite.

One thing I do know, however, is that this has been the most recent year of my life, and nobody can tell me otherwise. *At least not until next year.*

At the same time, I also know that I'm not finished writing about all of this just yet—because if anything, now is the time when I can actually start. The fact is, if I'm claiming to have something of value to say *on account of* being a member of the ~~mile-high club~~ triple-digit flight club, well, then I should only have credibility from this point on, right? I mean, how else could I be in a ~~standing missionary~~ position of experience to bring up the thought-terminating cliché of how I know what it's like and you don't? (Of course, I wouldn't do that without ruthlessly making fun of myself for it, but still.)

Nevertheless, I think we all know that the first rule of the triple-digit flight club is to never shut the fuck up about it, so I might as well dish out some first reactions all the same. That said, since I'm bound to go through one of those 'what does it all mean' phases someday soon anyway, I thought it'd be cool to stick to the data-oriented side of things for now. (That way I can at least let the paint dry a little bit before I start bitching about the color of the wall.) Besides, it was always my expense tracking from last year that led me down the rabbithole of counting my flights on a spreadsheet in the first place, so now I can finally do something with all the numbers I've been crunching this whole time. And holy Toledo, look at these numbers:

For the entire year, there was only a 35 percent chance I would be home in Berlin on a given weekend.

The longest stretch I had at home throughout the entire year was 15 days.

There were only 11 times when I was home for an unbroken week of seven consecutive days.

The total cost of all 100 flights was €4,914.91. That's roughly $5,800 (accounting for exchange rate fluctuations month to month).

The average cost of my Europe-only flights was €24.40, or roughly $29.

My total scheduled flight time for the year was 306 hours and 15 minutes, or 12 days, 17 hours, and 45 minutes.

The total distance of my flight paths was 190,405 kilometers, or 118,676 miles. That equates to 4.75 times around the Earth's circumference, or roughly halfway to the *god-damned moon*.

Unique destinations: 44.

World regions visited: 4 (Europe, North and South America, Middle East).

Countries visited: 24 (22 mainland countries and 2 island territories).

Countries I visited for the first time: 15

City I flew to the most: Berlin (38 times).

Cities I flew to just once: 30.

Cities I flew to just twice: 8.

Cities I flew to 3 times or more: 5.

Total airlines flown: 10.

Airline I flew the most: easyJet (75 flights).

Airline I flew that no longer exists: Air Berlin (whose assets were largely acquired by easyJet).

Flights missed: zero.

Mile high club visits: also zero.

Most flights in one calendar month: 18.

Fewest flights in one calendar month: 4.

Total flights seated in my own row: 16 (estimated).

Flights for which I have photographic evidence of my own row: 11.

Total unique airports flown into or out of: 50.

Airport with the dumbest security setup: Denver. (I thought I'd mix in a few non-numerical judgments as well.)

Airport with the dumbest concourse/terminal setup: Geneva. (The whole thing is just one big hallway, but they do get extra credit for the free public transportation to the city with every arriving boarding pass.)

City with the worst options for getting to/from the airport without paying more than the cost of your flight: London, and it doesn't even matter which airport. (I thought I was just being cheeky about this, but it turns out GoEuro came out with a list of the 10 most inconvenient European airport transfers last year, and London airports were first, second, fourth, and seventh. Lmao, those tossers.)

Airport with the best [*anything previously mentioned*]: No idea. Only the bad ones stick with you, don't they?

Hostels stayed at: 17. And they all stuck with me.

Money spent on travel-sized items like toothpaste: incalculable.

Selfies taken: I don't know, maybe 8.

Selfies taken for my mom: all 8 of them, probably.

Number of encounters with people aged 50 and up who (A) know that it's common courtesy to turn your phone's brightness down during evening flights, and (B) also know how to do so: very few. (Okay, that was a cheap shot, but I'm talking about when they're seated outside your immediate vicinity, so like, you can't help them out without causing a scene. Either way, this next one is an even bigger doozy.)

Estimated carbon dioxide emissions for all 100 flights: around 28 tons.

Now, right off the bat, that's clearly a carbon footprint sized for sasquatch, but it's also tough to know how accurate it is because of how many different methodologies for ~~capturing bigfoot~~ calculating emissions are out there. Many of them assign slightly nuanced values to the fixed variables (like fuel burn rate, passenger load factor, trip distance adjustments, and personal fatigue from not being able to find an online emissions counter tool that let me put in a hundred

entries at once), and those small differences don't scale uniformly, so it's hard to know which one to trust. Still, whatever the real number is, I know that it's a hefty one—and that's why I chose not to prevaricate by hiding behind a more generous estimate like 15.1 tons, which is the total I got after tediously logging every single flight into the International Civil Aviation Organization's (a UN agency) calculator separately.

The thing is, even at 16 tons, that's already on par with the average emissions per American each year, and *that's* already three times the global average. So despite how elated I am to have hit my goal of a hundred flights, I also can't help but wonder if that asterisk will start to look bigger and more disgusting to me (and everyone else) as time goes on. Assuming it most certainly will, I can only imagine what it's going to look like if and when the planet survives long enough for me to have grandchildren.

"Wow, grandpa, you used to be a dick! Well, you're *still* a dick, but you *used* to be one, too! Tell us more about what Venice was like before it sank! Oh, and for heaven's sake, turn down the display brightness on your phone!"

Actually, you know what? If my theoretical grandkids are polished enough to make Mitch Hedburg references like that, I'll take it. Besides, it's not like there were any greener ways for a commoner like me to fly a hundred times this past year anyway (*since they don't exist yet*), so the cognitive dissonance I feel is mostly because I give a shit in the first place—which can't always be said about the powers that be who define our options and then blame it on individual responsibility as a way to shift the narrative away from their own lack of accountability.

What I mean to say is that the arguments for individual responsibility that we face (mostly by corporate shilling and pearl-clutching news media) are usually just trying to shift blame onto the victim. Like, although living a zero-waste, 100% vegan, and carbon-neutral life is certainly a good practice for people who

manage to do it, making personal lifestyle choices like that only *feels* like we're doing something to change the big picture, it doesn't push the needle in any way that could ever match the timeframe or scope of change that corporations and policymakers are capable of, so all it does is buy them more time to make a buck.

Side note: did you know that the term 'carbon footprint' was introduced by BP? (Yes, *that* BP, the company that created what's probably the worst environmental disaster in history when it spilled millions of gallons of crude oil into the ocean.) The company even introduced its own 'carbon footprint calculator' in 2004 so that normal people could be tricked into thinking that they were personally outpacing the company at heating up the planet by living their everyday lives.

I mean, how the hell do you tackle something like climate change with a bottom-up approach like that? The only way individual responsibility could '*trickle down*' all the way back up to the top is if you shot it vertically out of a firehose. And I don't even care if we're talking about private corporations or state-run enterprises; if individual responsibility is the answer when 51 percent of global industrial greenhouse gasses since 1988 can be traced to just 25 corporate and state producers, then we might as well go join the Amish, because 1988 was the year when climate change was officially recognized and *every major player in the game* already knew about it. Yes, it takes individual responsibility to push the envelope of change, but that's only because the big and mighty refuse to play ball until they're forced to. Individual responsibility can't do it alone.

Take me and my 100 flights, for example.

I mean, if I hadn't booked a single one of those flights … *actually you know what,* let's make it, 'If I hadn't booked a single flight in my entire life'… *actually you know what,* let's make it, 'If I lived a 100 percent vegan, zero-waste, carbon-*negative* life since birth,' would that have stopped a single plane from taking off anywhere in the world this year? The answer to that is a

resounding fuck no, and I'm not just doing mental gymnastics here to exonerate myself from my own contributions; the fact is, I'm doing mental gymnastics to say that the tenants of individual responsibility cannot *only* apply to ordinary citizens when literally *none* of them have the power to make immediately scaleable differences the way that corporations and policymakers do. Sure, it's a completely dishonorable stance to take because it makes me sound like I don't want the change enough to act upon it myself, but fuck it. I'm not rich and powerful, I'm trying my best, and I don't have a car, so give me a break because all I did was book flights that still would've taken off whether I was on them or not.

So anyway, besides my highly increased virtue signaling, what else is new? Has anything else changed now that I've joined the triple-digit flight club?

Well, I've previously mentioned the thing about being able to wake up without an alarm for early morning flights, but I bet that'll go away once I stop traveling —plus I never had the balls to put it to the test anyway.

I suppose there's been a few obvious upgrades as well, like how velvety smooth my airport security routine has gotten, and how masterful at packing I am now (despite how packing still sucks every time).

I've also gotten crazy good at gauging the best time to leave for the airport (assuming it's the correct one), and although that's very useful, it can also cause a bit of friction when people I'm traveling with *think* we need to go earlier when I *know* we don't. The good news is I've learned how to put up with it and be patient, because otherwise I wouldn't have been able to show any growth.

And for better or worse, here's a few additional things I've learned:

I've learned that I don't get in bad moods in airports anymore, like ever, because despite how they're practically designed to make people crabby, they've also become my unconventional place of zen.

I've learned that I typically spend three times as much money if I'm traveling with friends versus when I travel alone.

I've learned that I sleep better on the starboard side of the plane than I do on the port (because *data*), and that makes the mildly hectic open-seating boarding process on Southwest Airlines even spicier for me.

I've learned that my favorite thing to do when I first get to a new city is to go for a run through its largest and greenest park.

I've learned that Unicef could easily be the biggest scam on the planet but I would never know and I'd still donate (because what else am I going to do with a collection of fifty low value coins from seven different countries that I probably won't visit again for five to ten years?)

I've learned that I recover from jetlag at a paltry rate of 40 minutes per night, which means my body clock is either (A) abnormally strong for resisting change so well, or (B) abnormally weak for being such a piece of shit at adapting.

I've learned that no matter how many times you pack workout clothes and don't end up using them on the trip, you still gotta keep hope alive.

And lastly, along with everything else that's changed, I've learned that you've changed too. In the beginning you were just a handful of real people I already knew, but now you're all the exact same make-believe person that my imagination thinks is following along, close-reading, and making me paranoid about whether or not I've contradicted my previous self. Do you know how many times I double checked my ~~quick maths~~ slow and questionable maths from earlier (as if someone would *ever* take the time to go through it all *just* to point out my inevitable mistakes)? Like, why do you have to be such an imaginary dick? And here I thought I had set the bar at my hypothetical grandparenthood... Let's call it even.

…

So now that it's all said and done (and *way* too fresh), if you put me on the spot and asked me right exactly now if I would do it all again, I'd say it depends on what you mean. For example, if we're talking about going back in time and doing it all over, my answer would be yes in a heartbeat. *But,* if we're talking about doing it again, as in a *second* year of 100 flights, my answer would probably be no—*not unless I had a fat TV deal, or at least some of those plastic wings, damnit.* The thing is, I just banged out 29 flights over the last 62 days (with few to spare), and that's simply too much looking out of an airplane window by yourself, staring at the Earth, and overthinking. Do you know that adage about how you should be careful with your words when you're with other people, but also be careful with your thoughts when you're alone? It's kinda like that.

And please don't get me wrong, because I'm not gonna pretend that I went on some radically mind-altering journey you'd never be able to understand without experiencing it yourself. (I said I wouldn't do that without making fun of myself for it, remember?) All I'm saying is that it was way more draining than I expected it to be, and that probably has more to do with me personally than it does with all the flights. At the same time, it's also true that I had the absolute

time of my life doing it, so I probably just have sour grapes about everything coming to an end. The fact is, as someone who's always ~~seeking attention~~ trying to outdo himself, I already know that this is going to be a tough 365 days to beat, and it just might turn out to be the most memorable year of my life.

Nevertheless, I still haven't had time to reflect on it yet (and I've also got my inevitable 'what does it all mean' phase coming up soon anyway), so I think it's best to end this one here before I *really* start to overthink it. That said, I thought I'd do so by bringing up a line from *Zorba the Greek* (a Cretan novel from 1946 that teems with thoughtful one-liners like the one in question), and I think you'll understand why it's so meaningful to me:

"All those who actually live the mysteries of life haven't the time to write, and all those who have the time, don't live them."

I'm so grateful I had a chance to try both. It's been an unforgettable year.

…

I wrote this on a flight from Milan to Berlin, 22 July 2018.

XXX

Chapter 21: Language Buffy the Vernacular Slayer

You know that feeling of temporary disorientation you sometimes get when you wake up in a new place and can't remember where you are for a minute? Well, it gets even weirder when you're on a plane that's just about to land and you wake up with no idea what country you're about to be in. *Plus you're surrounded by strangers.*

What's extra weird about that (to me, at least) is how there's usually another layer of confusion that comes with it, and that's the question of which language to try first when the flight attendant or the person sitting next to you inevitably nudges you awake (to prepare for landing or whatever). Now, obviously defaulting to English is always a safe bet, but I've also been flying back to Berlin so often that my brain has developed a habit of choosing German without my consent. At that point, and before I can even think about it, the word *entschuldigung* ('excuse me') comes spilling out of my mouth, even if it's the wrong thing to say; it's like my subconscious has already decided to go ahead and locate whatever tumor of half-broken German exists up there, and then it pokes it with a stick.

I think it's pretty cool how that whole process feels like it happens automatically at this point, but it's actually a fairly common technique (when we're fully conscious) to establish easy-to-remember ~~trigger words~~ activation words as a way of jump-starting our thoughts in another language. (Have you ever forgotten the lyrics to a song that you used to know by heart, only to have it all come back to you as soon as you were reminded of the first few words? It works sort of like that.) Similarly, this technique is also helpful for switching between multiple accents of the same language, however in those situations it's usually more effective to use localized phrases as opposed to single words. For example, if you already know how to do an impression of a Received Pronunciation accent (aka your standard, posh-sounding BBC English) but can't think of how to start, all you really have to do is imitate anything Hermione Granger says in the *Harry*

Potter films (e.g., "Is that *really* what my *hair* looks like from the back"), and that should get the ball rolling. (I think technically she speaks with a Contemporary RP accent, but I'm no expert, so I just stick to whichever accent says the word 'competitive' without pronouncing either one of its two letter 't's.) Alternatively, if you're trying to ~~switch over~~ go down under to a General Australian accent, another kind of trick is simply to repeat the words "raise up lights" faster and faster in a General American accent, and eventually that should start to sound like Crocodile Dundee is saying the words, "razor blades." *Raiseuplights*.[1]

Anyway, despite whatever ball of confusion I might wake up to on the plane, knowing that English will virtually always be a serviceable fallback option no matter where we touch down is such an insane privilege for native speakers, isn't it? I mean, the primary language of my destination city was something *other* than English a whopping 85 times out of all 100 of my flights. And I suppose that *does* make sense when you're traveling mostly in and around Europe, but I bet it's even easier to take the privilege for granted when it's constantly switched on like that. For instance, back when I was in Tenerife around flight 41,[2] I was legitimately shocked by the amount of restaurants I saw that offered their menus in German (in addition to the expected translations of Spanish for locals and English for tourists). So like, while it may have been unbeknownst to me at the time that the Canary Islands were a hotspot for German vacationers (which explains both the menus *and* the five and a half hour direct flights from Berlin), my point is that the mere act of being surprised to see those considerations in a place that's so far removed from Deutschland was already telling enough, because that's what native English speakers get catered to them *all the time*— and although that usually comes with feelings of comfort, gratitude, empowerment, or even smug satisfaction at times, it's also the reason why I tried my best to speak Spanish for the rest of that trip, *jaja*.

One of the things about living and traveling 'abroad' that I can never seem to get used to is just how 'normal' it is to overhear non-native English speakers using the language as some kind of neutral territory amongst themselves, *especially* when there are no native speakers involved. Of course, that's not exactly a new phenomenon by any means, but *come on*, do you know how rare of a situation it

has to be for an American to be speaking a second language *that's also a second language for the person they're speaking to*? Shit's impressive. And while the running joke is that the average American speaks a total of 0.7 languages *including English*, the truth is, it's still far more likely for someone in the EU to speak three languages (~35%) than it is for an American to speak two (~22%).[3] And I guess we can pick whatever justification we want as to why that's the case (e.g., CuZ wE dOn'T nEEd otHEr LAngUaGEs, and eUROpE haS LikE 40 coUNtRiES iN iT), but this isn't about that anyway. Instead, it's about trying to put the shoe on the other foot, going down an absolutely massive rabbithole of contact linguistics, and then sharing all of the good parts—because as dorky as it sounds, I'm kind of obsessed with what it's like to have to think my thoughts in another language. (Of course, that doesn't stop my thoughts from being totally asinine to begin with, but it's still a neat thing to experience, so I wanted to share it as best I could.)

Learning a new language is difficult, no buts about it. It's hard to make time for it, it's hard to find good opportunities to practice, and most of all (for me), it's hard to get over the fear of looking and/or feeling stupid when you mess up.[4] For instance, I know a guy who thinks the word *badass* is what you say when you want to describe a nasty smell, and people always look at each other funny whenever he says something like, "Eww, that's bad-*ass*." The problem is, nobody ever seems to correct him for it, and that's probably because they either don't want him to feel embarrassed, or it's simply because it's not that big of a deal in the first place. Either way, this poor guy is still left in a purgatory where he'll never know the truth because nobody will ever tell him—including me. (But that's only because I secretly wish everyone would start saying bad *ass* the way he does, so I can't be the one to end it. Besides, he probably doesn't worry about being wrong as much as I do anyway.)

So that's just one example, and it wasn't even that bad *ass* to begin with, was it? I mean, you can clearly tell what he *thought* it meant, and who knows, maybe there's a similar phrase in one of the *other* two languages he spoke before he learned English. (That's a lot to keep track of, you know?) But it's not just that either, because for every situation in which we might get the language wrong for the right context, there's also a situation in which we can get the language right

for the wrong context. Personally, I'll *never* forget the exact three situations I was in when I first learned that the Brazilian Portuguese phrases of '*Já volto,*' '*Vamos marcar,*' and '*Estou chegando*' ("I'll be right back," "Let's plan something," and "I'm arriving") were all teensy little white lies that people from Rio will oftentimes interpret to mean, "I'm probably not coming back and this is your social cue to that effect," "Let's not [plan anything] and say we did," and "I haven't even gotten dressed yet." All that being said, as soon as I totally embarrassed myself by getting each one of those fairly endearing cultural nuances wrong, I was sure to remember them for the rest of all eternity. Meanwhile, however, what's weird about it now is that whenever I say one of those phrases in English, I can't help but think about those other contexts in my head, and that makes me have to double-check to make sure I meant what I thought I meant when I said what I said in the first place. (*Entschuldigung*?)

Side note: if any of this starts to sound similar to all of the bilingual code switching stuff I already brought up back in Chapter 12, that's because it totally *is* similar—only this time I'm not going to be pulling a bait-and-switch just so that I can talk about getting a haircut. In fact, I've actually been steadily ~~growing it back out~~ putting this chapter together ever since, and now that I've finally eclipsed the 100 flight mark (and don't know what else to do with myself), I think now's the right time to release the kraken. (Fair warning: this chapter will most likely be absolutely gigantic—*and by absolutely gigantic I mean most likely longer than everything else up until this point combined*—but when all is said and done, I'm sure it'll be my favorite one as well.)

So anyway, once my brain started getting slapped around by other languages on the regular, that started to affect how I thought about 'meaning' altogether. I guess that's something I probably would've expected had I ever stopped to think about it beforehand, but who goes around stopping themselves to think about things like that? Not me. Five years ago I was just a guy who thought he spoke Spanish well enough to *tell* people he did. And five years before that I was just a guy who dropped his Spanish minor in college for the same reason—and I only bring that up now because of the hindsight coincidence that I merely dropped it so that I'd have more room in my schedule to do a double-major in philosophy instead (*which sounds like hindsight douchiness, and I know I've mentioned all*

of that before, but let me finish), and something that I've never forgotten about since then is a concept from the 1920s called the semiotic triangle of meaning, which I ended up studying the following year in a philosophy course on language. (*I'm not sure if that makes up for literally any of the douchiness whatsoever, but yeah whatever.*)

Alright, so in its basic form, the semiotic triangle is a theoretical model that attempts to define 'the meaning of meaning,' and it's predicated on the timeless conundrum that even if we were to agree upon the existence of reality, there'd still be no way for us to 'access' reality directly, because all that our brains and languages can do is make *indirect* sense of it. What this assumes, then, is that there are only two things that we can do with reality: one, interpret it with our minds, and two, make references to it with our words. To illustrate this a bit better, the guy who developed the field of general semantics (aka Alfred Korzybski) once famously said, "The map is not the territory." What he meant by that was, just as a map of a place is not literally the place itself, our brains and our languages are not reality itself either. (Or in other words, unicorns are real, but they don't exist.)

Nevertheless, the semiotic triangle is meant to help us understand how meaning works in spite of all that shit anyway—because if meaning *does* exist, then it must exist somewhere, right? Thus, in attempt to figure that out, the two dudes who introduced the triangle (aka Ogden and Richards) decided to break meaning down into three interconnected components (*hence the shape*):

The objects and/or experiences in the 'real world' (often called the *referent*).

The thoughts and/or concepts within our minds (or the *reference*).

And the symbols and/or words in our language (or the *representation*).

At each corner of the triangle, the relationship between its two adjoining sides is slightly different. First, the link between language and the mind is always direct (because our words correspond to thoughts that we can associate right back to those words). Second, the link between the mind and the real world can either be direct or indirect (since conscious thoughts can correspond to things that are right in front of us, nowhere near us, or even to intangible experiences). Lastly, the link between language and the real world is always indirect (since words themselves are really just symbolic placeholders that could just as easily be changed to something else). Thus, when you put all of this hokey pokey together, the resulting triangle model suggests that for meaning to exist, a word must first correspond to a concept in the mind directly, and then that *reference* can correspond to whatever real world *referent* the word indirectly *represents*. Naturally, this mouthful of a process also works in the opposite direction, but the key here is that there's no flying back and forth between Languagetown and Real World City without making a layover in Mindville first. Or, as Korzybski put it (without trying so hard), "The word is not the thing."

So all that's fine and dandy, but it still doesn't give us a solid answer as to where and/or how meaning actually exists (*apart from begging the question that it already does*). Meanwhile, Ogden and Richards didn't even bother to take a stab at it, since they were too busy trying to figure out how to blame all of their problems on other people's misuse of words—which, first of all, is ~~totally~~ sadly relatable, but it's also why their model was criticized for being overly simplistic and incomplete. At the very least, however, their triangle did turn out to be an extremely useful tool for getting introduced to semantics, so it was probably a good thing that they stopped there. In fact, even when we take the question of where meaning exists seriously (i.e., by not moving the goalposts), we usually end up back where we started anyway. Like, we can't reasonably claim that meaning exists in multiple places at once (*or worse, in between places and therefore no place at all*), so at the end of the day we're somewhat forced to pick a corner no matter what.

Side note: I don't want to get too bogged down here because (A) if somebody

had figured it out already I wouldn't have wasted so much time with all of that background info, and (B) it would be an even *bigger* waste of time if I thought I'd be able to figure out the answer myself, am I right? In any case, I do think it's at least worth a quick and dirty process of elimination to see how easily making an attempt at it can cause us to end up running in ~~triangles~~ circles.

So the first corner we might want to rule out is language, and the typical argument here is that words are just arbitrary placeholders and therefore cannot bear any true meaning. There are loads of catchphrases that get tossed around in support of this rationale (e.g., "Words don't mean, people do"), however the most famous one is probably that verse from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* when the leading lady goes, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Altogether, this seems like a pretty tenable opening argument (*because if Billy Shakes says it, you know it's true*), and it's also kind of tough just to think of ways to refute it, right?

Oddly enough, there *is* a competing theory out there called sound symbolism, and this is the idea that some words and/or sounds might actually have non-arbitrary meaning, straight up. The typical poster child for sound symbolism is onomatopoeia (which is your classic case of when words like *boom*, *squirt*, and *pop* imitate the sounds they represent), however there's also a more advanced version of this called ideophones, and those are when words *sound like* what their definitions *mean*.[5] Think of it this way: the word 'frumpy' is not a sound that something makes (so it's clearly not an onomatopoeia), yet somehow the sound of the word 'frumpy' might still give people who hear it the impression that whatever is being described as frumpy is probably a little weird looking. Does that make sense? Like, it just sort of *feels* that way, similar to how the word 'putrid' might *feel* like it has to refer to something gross. And speaking of something gross, don't you agree that the concept of 'explosive diarrhea' would make much less sense if it were couched in a teeny tiny word like 'mip' or something? I mean (*not that you would actually do what I'm about to suggest, but*), if you went around telling everybody that you had an uncomfortable bout with *mip* this morning, do you think the sound of that could even hold a candle to what you truly went through? I don't. (Btw, please don't ever hold a candle to mip.)

Anyway, another (far less scatological) argument for sound symbolism focuses on how certain sounds are oftentimes super common among words with similar definitions, such as how *glitter, glisten, glimmer, glow, glint,* and *gleam* are all related to light and/or reflections in some way. Naturally, the suggestion here is that the sound made by the letters 'g' and 'l' together must have an inherent visual-related meaning in and of itself (which would also explain the words *glimpse, glance, glare,* and umm... *glander*). Then again, it's also possible that people simply got into the habit of creating similar-sounding words for purely practical reasons. I mean, shit, even Shakespeare himself was mostly just tweaking existing words and iterating on Latin when he came up with hundreds of terms and phrases we still use today.[6]

So yeah, due to similar rebuttals, the idea of sound symbolism hasn't exactly been well-respected over the years. Nevertheless, it's still tough to completely rule out the possibility that some sounds might still have meaning independent of word formation anyway (and that once a language reaches a particular threshold everything becomes arbitrarily replaceable thereafter). In fact, some psychological experiments have shown that people will often arrive at the same conclusions about certain sounds as much as 90 to 95 percent of the time due to what's now known as the Bouba-Kiki effect. During these experiments, speakers of various languages were shown two shapes (one round and one pointy) and then they were asked to identify, for example, which of the two shapes was called '*takete,*' and which one was called '*baluba.*' Unfortunately, now that you've seen how the words look written down, you may have already been influenced by the shapes of their letters. That said, isn't it wild how you still knew what the participants' dominant answers were without me mentioning them anyway? Furthermore, isn't it *also* wild that the very first experiment to observe this phenomenon on record was conducted in 1929 by a German psychologist on the island of Tenerife? Can't explain that! (Just kidding, it's probably just another hindsight coincidence.)

In any case, assuming that we're not very convinced by sound symbolism, the next corner we might try to rule out is that of real world objects. Our main

suspicion here is the question of whether or not meaning itself could ever truly be *inside* of something like a rock—*and if so,* would that particular rock lose its meaning if we chipped a piece of it off? *And if not,* what would happen to meaning if we kept chipping the rock all the way down until it turned into dust? *And if that would somehow cause the entire meaning to change,* then was meaning really ever *in* the rock to begin with? (This is a rendition of something called the *sorites paradox,* which is essentially the idea that whatever meaning we assign to a rock will ultimately be too vague for us to know when a rock becomes a rock, as well as when it ceases to be one. The original paradox used grains of sand to question the point at which a heap of sand becomes a non-heap.)

Alternatively, it's also plausible that all of this stuff boils down to human error and imprecision, however that brings us right back to the same stumbling block as before: because if a rock (or any other real-world object for that matter) were to have meaning in and of itself, then there'd still be no way for us to access it, at least not fully. (Granted, we might *think* that we are close to true meaning—and we might actually *be* close to it—but we'd still never be able to know for sure, so at best our understanding of reality would therefore be like an asymptote that gets closer and closer to the line of objective meaning without ever touching/intersecting it.) Of course, all of this could still be the truth, *and we'd never knowingly know for sure,* but that would also end our discussion, so let's press onward.

Finally, with only one corner left, we turn to what should be our answer: that meaning exists solely in the mind. Unfortunately, despite how this one starts out by looking like a compelling option, it also falls completely apart without the presence of the other two corners. (Because if objective meaning exists *only* in the mind, then how could it have gotten there when reality is inaccessible and all words are arbitrary? Like, does a baby's mind have meaning from day one, or does it somehow ascertain meaning through the experiences it has and the words it hears? Because if literally *any* part of it has to do with the latter two, then how could those things not have meaning? Alternatively, if meaning existed only in language, then it wouldn't matter if my mind or your mind were around to think about it, and it also wouldn't matter if the objects were even there in the first

place. Similarly, if meaning existed only in the objects themselves, it also wouldn't matter if we were around to think about them, nor would it matter if we had language with which to do it.) Anyway, I'm probably glossing over a lot of stuff here (and confusing myself in the process), but the main drawback of this corner is that if meaning exists *only* in the mind, then it either becomes something that's non-transferable to other people (and therefore useless to us), or it becomes something that's completely *subjective* to each individual so long as words are up for interpretation during the transfer—and if *that's* merely the fault of words not having any meaning again, well, then shit, are we back at words already? Furthermore, the whole point of this was to see if we could find a true and *objective* 'meaning of meaning' (since that's what would be useful to us), so if we're abandoning that altogether, ~~then wtf are we even doing~~ then maybe it's time to think outside of the triangle.

One of the more contemporary approaches to this is the idea that meaning exists as an entirely separate social and/or cultural construct which is then grandfathered into the triangle via language. From this perspective, meaning is both a real and objective thing that people create together, *and* it's still a subjective abstraction in the mind of each individual (which means it remains compatible with the triangle). As a result, since this kind of meaning depends entirely upon the agreements we make within our language, then that would make words—*which were once seen as arbitrary*—the most 'meaningful' component. Here's a classic analogy of how that might work:

Three professional baseball umpires are sitting at a table arguing over who has the best method for calling balls and strikes. The first umpire (*reality*) says, "Some are balls and some are strikes, but I call 'em as they are!" The second umpire (*the mind*) disagrees and says, "Nope, sorry. Some are balls and some are strikes, but I call 'em as I see 'em!" Finally, the third umpire (*language*) steps in and says, "You're both wrong. Some are balls and some are strikes, but they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." (*I love that one.*)

Of course, there *is* a downside to social constructionism, and it's essentially the

same reason why the triangle boys were so butthurt over people's mishandling of words in the first place: because if individual meaning is just an abstraction of words, and if those words are just abstractions of socially constructed meanings, then that means we all walk around with different degrees of approximate meaning for just about everything all the time. (*Sounds about right.*) ~~Meaning~~ Meanwhile, in order for a language to function most effectively, it's also kind of important for words to mean the same things to us that they do to everyone else (since, per Richards, "Whenever we hear anything said, we spring spontaneously to an immediate conclusion, namely, that the speaker is referring to what we should be referring to were we speaking the words ourselves.") Unfortunately, however, our experience tells us that this just isn't the case—because not only do words mean different things to different people all the time, but they also *change* meanings just as often. (And that's hard for linguistic purists aka prescriptivists aka sticklers to accept.)

Side note: there's no denying that I'm a fuddy duddy word usage cop myself most of the time (*cough, Chapter 10, cough*), but I'm working on being less annoying about it. The truth is, I really don't know why I think the phrase 'as per usual' needs to go die in a fiery pit of hell, and I also don't know why I think 'never ceases to amaze me' should go with it. (Btw, it's either 'per usual' or 'as usual,' just pick one. Otherwise it's the same as saying 'irregardless' instead of 'irrespective' or 'regardless.') Honestly though, I probably don't even know where I draw the lines for most of my own stickleries,[7] and it's also a genetic fallacy to claim that the current ~~use~~ usage of words needs to be similar to their original meanings anyway. Hell, even Socrates said (according to Plato) that, "[Words] have been so twisted in all manner of ways that I should not be surprised if the old language, when compared with that now in use, would appear to us to be a barbarous tongue."

Now, what's extra juicy about that (apart from the fact that Socrates was unironically pointing out the reason why he probably *shouldn't* have been a prescriptivist in the first place), is that to the Ancient Greeks, the word 'barbarian' was simply a reference to anyone who didn't speak Greek, since that was considered uncivilized and/or 'barbaric' in today's sense of the word. Furthermore, a 'barbarism' is what they would call any intermixing of Greek

with a foreign language (which they did *not* like), and today we use that in English to mean pretty much any kind of linguistic fuckup. Finally, to top it all off, the Ancient Greek word *bárbaros* (which roughly translates to 'a babbler') was only coined that way because the Greeks felt that anyone who spoke a foreign language sounded like they were saying "*bar bar bar*" all of the time. (*Insert "blah blah blah, it's all Greek to me" punchline here*.)

Anyhow, when it comes to semantic shifts (i.e., changes to word usage as language evolves over time), there's a handful of ways that we can change meaning; for instance, sometimes we take words with negative denotations and flip them around into things that are much more positive (like how the word 'terrific' was once used for describing things that induced fear and/or terror, and now we use it as a term for describing something as excellent). This kind of shift is called an amelioration, and its reverse (such as how the word 'egregious' once meant that something was illustrious and/or quite good, but now it means that something is flagrant and/or shockingly bad) is called a pejoration.

Similarly, another kind of shift is called a semantic narrowing, and this is a useful way that we take a pair of similar words and turn them into more specific versions of themselves, like how 'inexpensive' and 'cheap' have drifted apart to mean 'good value' and 'bad quality,' respectively. On the flipside—*and this is where prescriptivists typically get the most upset*—sometimes we move away from the more granular meanings via a kind of shift called semantic widening. Common examples of this include how the word 'less' has widened so that it also means 'fewer' nowadays, as well as how the word 'decimate' (i.e., to reduce by one tenth) has become synonymous with 'devastate' and/or 'destroy.' Finally, there's also the classic case of how the word 'literally' has been an officially recognized synonym of 'figuratively' since 2013 despite how it was originally used for emphasis whenever a commonly understood metaphor was in fact not metaphorical at all—like if you ate a bunch of butterflies and then *literally* had butterflies in your stomach, or if a baby dropped its bottle and then *literally* cried over spilled milk.

Anyway, on the whole, whenever a new meaning spreads throughout a speaking community, the original meaning is rarely displaced right away (if at all). Instead, one of them may become phased out over time (like when people started and then stopped ~~trying to make 'fetch' happen~~ saying 'radical' to mean awesome, or how the word 'undertaker' eventually lost its synonymy with the word 'entrepreneur' once the mortician angle took over). Alternatively, in many cases it's perhaps even more common for both meanings to coexist in perpetuity, like how the word 'chill' means 'to hang out' just as much as it means 'to cool' these days, or how the word 'thirsty' can also mean the horny kind of desperate, and that doesn't seem to be going away any time soon.

In total, something like 40 percent of all English words are polysemous/polysemantic (according to what I've read). Take, for example, the word 'take' (pun intended); on the Oxford English Dictionary website, there are 85 entries for 'take' as a transitive or intransitive verb alone. That's already pretty ridiculous, but if you went so far as to include all of its idiomatic and phrasal verb entries as well (such as 'to take on,' 'to take offense,' or 'to take effect'), it would *take* you exactly 238 normal-sized sheets of printer paper to print it all out. (You can *take* my word for that.) But despite how 'take' is just a juggernaut of an example—along with other big dogs like *stand, run, call, break*, and *set*—it's not uncommon for us to keep piling on meaning after meaning for any given word. Of course, this is generally unremarkable to us, but sometimes it can lead us into trouble because every now and then we end up with a term that has multiple meanings in contradiction, like how the word 'table' (as a verb) can be about bringing something up for discussion *and* it can be about setting something aside rather than discussing it. Likewise, a 'sanction' can be either a measure of approval or a measure of disapproval. And lastly, if something is 'biweekly,' that means it either happens twice per week or once every two.

So I dunno, maybe those aren't *that* big of a problem for us, but even if they were, I'm not sure how we would go about fixing them in the first place. I mean, it's not like we get letters in the mail asking us to vote on them once and for all or anything like that, and even we did, we'd probably have to start by taking a look at more important questions, like how to differentiate between the words 'inflammable' and 'flammable' (which are apparently two different things

despite how both of them are the opposite of 'nonflammable'). Similarly, there's also been some confusion in my life surrounding 'possums' and 'opossums' (because apparently those are two different things as well), however from what I hear, the trick is to remember that possums are flammable and opossums are inflammable. *Funny joke*.

Anyway, when it comes to how exactly new meanings are introduced, a great majority of them will fall into one of three categories; first, sometimes we need to fill linguistic gaps that are brought on by new technologies/innovations, and we often do so by repurposing existing words (e.g., *tweet*, *text*, *stream*) as opposed to coming up with brand new ones. Second, sometimes certain slang terms can become organically popular enough for them to reach the entire speaking community on their own, such as how the phrasal verb 'to fuck with' has just recently started to mean 'to associate with' and 'to get along with' in addition to its other meanings of 'to mess with' and 'to joke around with' (which is what it has typically meant throughout my lifetime until this new cooler one showed up). Thirdly—*and this is the big spooky one*—sometimes people simply misinterpret existing meanings, and then their subsequent misuses of those words (and/or expressions, spellings, pronunciations, etc) will go on to influence other people to make the same errors until they reach widespread adoption. Naturally there's a bajillion examples of this, but the one I've decided to fuck with right now is how the phrase 'begs the question' was originally meant to be used as a way of describing arguments that unfairly assumed the conclusions they set out to prove were already true (e.g., the argument, "Murder is wrong, so euthanasia is wrong" begs the question that euthanasia is actually murder). Unfortunately, however, the phrase 'begs the question' also *sounds* like it means 'calls attention to the question' and/or 'warrants asking the question' *so much* that we've practically skunked the original meaning already, and it's also very likely that it will soon disappear from the English lexicon altogether, seeing as we still don't have any alternatives to replace it. (Btw, it's still *possible* for something that begs the question to have a true conclusion, it just can't be proven by a shitty, fallacious argument like that.)

Similarly, widespread misinterpretations like this can also cause changes to meaning *outside* of language as well, and I think my favorite example of this is

how shooting sleeves became a thing in basketball culture. Historically, the first quote-unquote "shooting sleeve" to be worn on a professional court was merely a compression treatment to help Hall of Fame guard Allen Iverson continue playing with an injured elbow. (If you pull up old highlights from the 2001 NBA Finals, it looks super weird because Iverson is the only player on the court wearing a sleeve, and meanwhile today you'll probably see at least four or five of them on the court at any one point.) Nevertheless, since most people didn't know what it really was at the time—*and Iverson scored 55 points in his first game wearing what appeared to be pantyhose on his arm*—a completely new meaning was born shortly thereafter. By the end of the season, Iverson had also won the league MVP award, and since players all around the world were dying to emulate him, *in the words of sportswriter Scoop Jackson,* "suddenly everybody had bursitis." (Of course, now that we're coming up on two decades later, it still remains to be seen if the sleeves actually do anything to enhance performance beyond a placebo effect, or if they were just a small cash cow for sports apparel companies.)

Anyhow, while most semantic shifts are just incidental cosmetic changes that probably don't make much of a difference, sometimes they can be a bit more influential on how we think and operate within the confines of our language. Take, for instance, the subjunctive mood in English; despite how it can actually help clarify meaning in some situations (like the difference between "The manager prefers that it *be* done tomorrow," and "The manager prefers that it *is* done tomorrow"), we hardly use it anymore.[8] As a result, this forces us to rely on context and/or find other ways of saying things much more often than we otherwise would've needed to, and a lot of grammarians fear that we'll end up abandoning the subjunctive modality altogether because of it. Of course, that wouldn't exactly be a sign of the apocalypse, but who knows, maybe it's a slippery slope where getting rid of the subjunctive will someday cause us to lose our ability to *think* subjunctive-type thoughts as well. (I mean, if you don't use it you lose it, right?)

So that's clearly an exaggeration, but it's not *that* much of a stretch when you consider the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which is the idea that a language and its structure are the limiting bounds of a speaker's cognitive

experience. (In other words, you can only think of a thought insofar as you have the words to render or express that thought.) Granted, sometimes we have feelings we can't describe, but surely our thoughts *about* those feelings (as well as any attempts at conveying them) are still restricted to whatever words we have at our disposal, aren't they? (*Because, like, name one thought you can't put into words*.) At the same time, even if our thoughts were all formed in some kind of wordless anti-language (sometimes called 'Mentalese'), then wouldn't we be constantly noticing ourselves struggling to convert certain thoughts back into language or something? I dunno, I guess it's tough to say—*or maybe I just* ^{*don't*} *have the words.*

Side note: did you know that some people don't have an inner monologue? This is that voice in your head which gets noticeably louder when you're reading something and you run into tough-to-pronounce speedbumpy words like anagnorisis, infundibulum, trichotillomania, and honorificabilitudinitatibus.[9] It's also what we're talking about when we say things like, "I can't even hear myself think right now." So yeah, apparently some people don't have that voice at all, and all of their thoughts are always soundless.

But getting back to the Sapir-Whorf, the focus is not so much about how we're *incapable* of thinking certain thoughts, it's more along the lines of how we just *wouldn't*. (Kinda like how a deaf person might be more likely to think in Mentalese as opposed to thinking in the sounds of words they've never actually heard.) Here's an example that explodes my brain: in Australia, there's an Aboriginal language called Guugu Yimithirr, which doesn't have any words for egocentric/relative directions such as left, right, in front of, or behind. Instead, it relies almost entirely upon cardinal/absolute directions such as north, south, east, and west. As a result, your 'left hand' is never your left hand in Guugu Yimithirr, because sometimes it's your west hand and other times it's your south hand. *Crazy, right*? (I mean, just think of the dad-jokes: "Hey son, will you pass me that screwdriver on your east? No son, your *other* east." Classic.)

What's truly remarkable about this, however, is the idea that there are about 750

native speakers of Guugu Yimithirr today, and supposedly all of them have the same seemingly instinctual sense of direction and/or orientation that doesn't require them to stop and stare at the sun or anything like that. (Apparently there *is* still a bit of wiggle room for applying relativity in other ways, but that's some incredible shit no matter how you spin it—and the way I *want* you to spin it is by concluding that the language itself turns people into human compasses simply by virtue of the words it doesn't have.)

So that's a pretty unusual case, but these sorts of blind spots aren't exclusive to lesser-known languages (although they do become more subtle and less consequential the bigger you go). For instance, has anyone ever asked you to explain the difference between a 'shade' and a 'shadow' in English? (*Quick, do it right now in your head.*) My brain exploded (once again) when a German asked me to do this—and it wasn't because I couldn't provide an answer or anything like that; it was because I had *already* been asked that exact same question by a Brazilian friend a few years prior. As it turns out, there's absolutely no semantic distinction between shades and shadows in German or Portuguese (or Spanish, French, Italian, Swedish, Dutch, or Greek for that matter), but for some reason English (and a bevy of other languages) decided that it was necessary for them to be two separate words (i.e., where 'shade' is an area of cooler temperature that you can physically occupy when an object like a tree blocks you from direct sunlight, and 'shadow' is the silhouette that's created when you, another object, or Peter Pan blocks any light source, including the sun).

Now, obviously I've had some extra time to nail down a respectable answer since then, but little nuances like that aren't always so easy to come up with when someone puts you on the spot. (*Case in point*: *you're on the spot right now.* What's the difference between a caregiver and a caretaker? What's the difference between a sample and an example? How come the words 'shameless' and 'shameful' are both regarded negatively? Can something be instinctive and not be instinctual? And lastly, how do you decide when to say "how about" as opposed to saying "what about" at the beginning of a sentence?) In any case, despite how vastly different the concepts of shades and shadows might have seemed to me in *my* head, the responses I got from both the German and the

Brazilian were essentially the same: "Why would you *ever* need to make that distinction?" And that's a totally valid point, isn't it?

I mean, imagine if we all agreed to start saying 'shadow' for both of those two concepts. Strictly speaking, would that cause any legitimate communication problems, or would people just recognize the context and immediately know which one we're talking about either way? (*Kinda like what we're trying to do with the subjunctive, right?*) Furthermore, despite how dramatic this would have to be, I'm pretty sure that a life has never been saved by the two additional seconds it *might* spare to have 'shade' as its own semantically narrowed word. At the same time, I'm also pretty sure that a handful of lives *have* been saved by the following (completely and utterly unrelated) semantically widened concept that exists only in Brazilian Portuguese, which is how virtually any kind of strapless dress, top, shirt, or bra can be referred to as a *tomara-que-caia* (aka an 'I-hope-it-falls-down').[10]

Admittedly, that's probably not the best example (since we can always root for nip slips in any language), but I still think it's wild how a term like that can almost force people to think about a wardrobe malfunction whenever it comes up —*especially for newer speakers who aren't used to hearing it*. Meanwhile, that also makes it seem like there's a certain degree of ~~debauchery~~ wishful thinking that's somehow pre-installed within the language itself, doesn't it? (At least for this particular part of ~~tit~~ it.)

Jokes aside though, that's really what the Sapir-Whorf is all about (*perspectives, not nipples*), because if our language is what we use in order to create meanings *for* reality, then it's necessarily going to affect our perceptions *of* reality. And with that being the case, this would appear to suggest that foreign languages are different not only because they carry different translations, but because they also carry different worldviews (i.e., their speakers literally experience and/or perceive a different reality).

One of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century was an Austrian philosopher named Ludwig Wittgenstein, and he famously said, "The limits of my languages means the limits of my world." He also said that whatever lies on the other side of those limits will come across as nonsense to us. Just think about how most modern Germanic languages (like English, German, and Swedish) refer to a person's age by saying that he or she 'is' a certain number of years old, whereas most modern Romance languages (like Italian, Romanian, and French) will say that a person 'has' a certain number of years. *Not obscure enough*? ~~What about~~ How about the way English speakers will say that they're *on* a plane as opposed to *in* one, or how Portuguese speakers will say that they had a dream *with* you as opposed to a dream *about* you?[11] At the end of the day, we interpret reality the way our languages instruct us to; it's what we think is 'normal' or 'the way things are,' and anything else just doesn't sound right.

Let's try some more advanced examples.

One of the most commonly misunderstood varieties of American English is African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), and that's mainly due to the misconception that it's just a 'broken' and/or 'slang' form of regular-ass English (aka Standard American English, aka ~~RAE~~ SAE). First of all, this is a mischaracterization, and it begs the question that a dialect has to follow all of the same rules as its parent language in order to be valid. Secondly, not only does AAVE have its own unique set of rules, but those rules are also extremely consistent with those of SAE anyway. For example, pretty much anytime SAE can create contractions, AAVE can omit the copula to create the same effect. (So like, just as the question, "Do you think they are here?" can become "Do you think they're here?" in SAE, it can also become, "Do you think they here?" in AAVE). Similarly, in situations when SAE cannot create contractions, neither can AAVE omit the copula. (So just as the response, "No, I don't think they are[.]" cannot become "No, I don't think *they're*[.]" in SAE, neither can it become "No, I don't think *they*[.]" in AAVE). It's also worth noting that most if not all speakers of AAVE can also speak SAE (meaning they're bidialectal and can switch back and forth whenever they want), and AAVE usually only makes up a third of a speaker's cumulative speech events.

In any case, due to what people don't know about AAVE (mostly because it's outside of their own dialect), they have a tendency to view it as barbarous and/or less advanced in comparison. Meanwhile, as a juicy matter of fact, one of the biggest reasons why people think AAVE is 'wrong' so often is because it has a grammatical aspect that *doesn't even exist* in SAE: the Habitual Be. This is when the helping verb 'be' is used in the present tense to indicate that an action is both customary and repeated (though not necessarily happening at the current moment), such as "We be cooking." In contrast, the only habitual aspect of SAE is found in the past tense, and that's marked either by the verbal phrase 'used to' (as in, "We used to cook"), or by the auxiliary word 'would' (as in, "We would always cook").[12]

Thus, as a result—*and just to illustrate how far the misunderstandings can go sometimes*—not only will many SAE speakers mistake the Habitual Be as ungrammatical speech (because, *sure*, in SAE it would be), but many of them will also mistake *how* they think it's being misapplied in the first place (since they'll often assume that 'be' can replace 'is' at any point willy nilly—which it cannot). For example, if AAVE speakers wished to convey that a guy named Joe was in the kitchen cooking, they might say, "*Joe is in the kitchen cooking*" (like quote-unquote "normal"), or they might omit the copula and say, "*He in the kitchen cooking.*" Meanwhile, if they wished to convey that Joe has been spending a lot of his time cooking in the kitchen lately, *that's* when they'd say that "*Joe be in the kitchen cooking.*" See the difference? Children who ~~are five years old~~ have five years can see it too. Check this out:

In a 2005 study, a communications researcher asked schoolchildren a short series of questions about pictures of Sesame Street characters to determine whether or not they distinguished the Habitual Be construction from the regular present tense. The subject groups in this experiment were (predictably) split up between white kids who were only familiar with SAE, and black kids who were familiar with AAVE at home and SAE at school. The researcher began by showing the children a picture of Cookie Monster feeling sick in bed while Elmo was standing nearby eating cookies. When she asked the children, "Who is eating

cookies," all of the children from both groups pointed to Elmo. However, when she asked the children, "Who *be* eating cookies," the white kids tended to point to Elmo, while the black kids pointed to Cookie Monster. There were some other relevant parts to the study as well, but this segment alone revealed two things: not only were the black children able to understand and identify the Habitual Be construction as early as five years old, but they were also able to apply it and figure out that the second prompt was truly asking "Who is sick?" (a subtextual meaning that simply wasn't there for SAE).

Alright, so as much as I love that example, here's one that I think is even better:

"I don't see nothing."

Now, right off the bat, there's an entire laundry list of languages that form sentences with double-negatives like this (also known as negative-concord languages), so if you're tempted to call it 'wrong' in AAVE, then you're also gonna have to do that for French, Portuguese, Persian, Russian, Greek, Polish, Hebrew, Hungarian, Spanish, Afrikaans, Italian, and oh yeah, Old English. *Brain exploded yet*?

(Btw, if you've just answered that question with something like, "No, because those other languages *are* wrong," well, then I've got you right where I want you.)

"I don't see anything."

Most English speakers (myself included) would probably say that this is the way it has to be. That it only makes sense this way. That simple maths can prove how

a second negative automatically nullifies the first. That *not seeing nothing* is necessarily the same exact thing as seeing *literally anything at all*…and then five minutes later we'd have no problem breaking that logic ourselves with an infamous 'no meaning yes' or something:

"Don't you want some candy?"

"No."

"So you *do* want some candy?"

"No, that's not what I said."

"Well, it's not *not* what you said."[13]

The fact is, there are a lot of things we say that don't even make sense to our fellow native speakers (like 'taking a piss' instead of 'leaving' one), yet we carry on saying them anyway. With that in mind, I had a sneaking suspicion for the longest time that this was the case for negative-concord languages (i.e., that their speakers must've somehow known in the back of their minds that the double-negative constructions didn't make much sense). As it turns out, however, that isn't true at all—*at least, not for the negative-concord monolinguals I asked about it*—because despite how bizarre and awkward it is to ask people if they think the only language they speak is perhaps 'wrong' about something, the consensus I got back was that they felt just as 'right' about their interpretation as I did of mine: that this is the way it has to be. That it only makes sense this way.

Stubbornly unconvinced, I went ahead and asked a few of my negative-concord bilingual friends for their thoughts on it as well—only this time my expectations were a bit more tempered. My guess was that maybe half of them would say that they ultimately switched sides once they became comfortable with the 'more logical' approach, but nope, I was wrong again; pretty much all of them told me that although the other way *did* make *some* sense to them, they still felt that the negative-concord method was the 'real' way, and therefore that's how they

literally think those thoughts in their heads.

So that was a tough pill to swallow, but at the end of the day it's all the same practical information being shared anyway, right? I guess all you really need is enough people to agree upon a given construction and you're good.

That's gotta be why the whole 'no meaning yes' thing is so confusing in English in the first place (*despite how it's not even unique to English*); because although we know *what* a person is saying, we don't always know *how* they're going to interpret our interpretation of it. On the one hand, replying to a net-negative question with a net-negative answer should totally cancel out and become the affirmative, right? On the other hand, a one-word answer like, "No" could just as easily be taken as a shortened form of "No, I don't," and that would make the entire equation turn into a triple-negative and thus negative overall. (Then again, if *that* were true, then how would answering with "No, I don't" be any different from answering with "Yes, I do" in response to the original question of "Don't you want some candy?" I mean, wouldn't it have needed to be "Yes, I don't" either way?)

There's actually a couple of decent explanations for this, and one of them is to say that most people will assume that the real question being asked here is simply, "*Do* you want some candy," and that speakers will often say "Don't you" as a way of being polite and/or not too forward with their offer (similar to how a coyish question like, "Won't you stay a bit longer?" kind of implies that the speaker wants the listener to stay, but doesn't want to spell it out in plane [*sic*] words like that).[14] This kind of thing is sometimes called a flouting implicature, and that's when a speaker knowingly breaks a conversational norm under the assumption that the listener is equally aware of what's going on. Of course, the problem with that is, they're *not* always aware of what's going on.

Alternatively, a perhaps more satisfying answer is to say that the "No" response is not even a refutation of the exact original question in the first place, and that

instead, it's more like a blanket negation that we throw over the entire exchange so that "No" equals 'no candy' regardless of whether or not the semantics make sense. That way, if we decide to clarify things even further by adding an *I don't* afterwards, that merely serves to reinforce the "No" rather than cancel it out—*so it's almost as if they work 'in concord' with each other, wouldn't you say*? And that right there, amigos, is exactly how a phrase like "*No veo nada*" ("I don't see nothing") can make total sense in a negative-concord language like Spanish; first it opens up with the '*No*' to sound the alarm that the whole enchilada is gonna be negative, and then it doubles down with the '*nada*' for extra ~~guacamole~~ confirmation. Also, as a convenient result, this consistent way of phrasing things is usually a lot harder to misinterpret, since we know that all of the ingredients will always add up to one big fat enchi-*nada*.

But despite how there's no real way for any socially constructed meaning to be 'wrong' per se, none of this changes the fact that some interpretations might still be 'more right' than others (*even if we can't tell which ones*). This is why we can't help but prefer one translation over another sometimes, because it just feels like some of them must be farther along that asymptote towards true and objective reality. That said, if we never see things from a different angle, then we may never get to make those judgment calls for ourselves—and that's not to say that it's absolutely necessary to do so, but *come on*, let's reward curiosity here.

Perhaps the most celebrated figure in the history of German literature was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and he famously said, "He who does not know foreign languages knows nothing of his own." Personally, there have been so many times where I've learned a new translation and my first thought was, "Lol, no that's stupid," only to think about it again later on and be like, "Wait, maybe *English* is the one that's stupid this time."[15] For example, I'll never forget one of the first few times I tried to say "I'm confused" in Portuguese, because I was immediately corrected for saying "*confusado*" in the past tense instead of *confuso* in the present. (Also, the correct form of the past tense in this case is *confundido*, so I would've been wrong either way.) This is an example of a negative transfer error, which is when we think something that works in one language will also work the same way in another. So at first I was obviously

confused by all of that, but then I started asking myself why we don't say "I'm confusey" (or even just "I'm confuse") in the present tense for English—after all, we don't say "I'm hungered" when we're hungry, we say "I'm hungry." (I mean, I suppose you *could* say that you're hungered *by* something, but nobody says "I am hungered" as a standalone like that, you friggin' alien.)

So I dunno, maybe I just never realized that past participle adjectives were a thing, but either way, stuff like that can really make you wonder sometimes if there's anything else that your language has been hiding from you. Case in point: has there ever been a word that you spent your entire life pronouncing in your head one way only to finally hear someone say it out loud in a very different way? Total mindfuck, right? That honestly just happened to me a week or two ago with the word *scouse* (aka the Liverpudlian accent), because I always thought it rhymed with 'snooze' for some odd reason. Anyhow, it's almost as if a small piece of your entire world has changed when something like that happens, right? It's like discovering that the Tooth Fairy isn't real, or that the sun never really rises or sets (because the Earth just rotates), or that the opposite of a firefly is a waterfall—*like, morphologically*.

But getting back to Goethe's point, I think that something similar happens when we start to see how meaning can get tangled up in other languages. Having said that, here's a handful of English words that have all made me feel like my entire life was a lie at some point, and the recurring theme is that they all have to do with how we interpret and/or understand both time and reality:

Since.

Ever *since* the days when I was sharing a flat with my three international roommates at Stanford (because I opted for quote-unquote "multicultural" housing), the amount of times I've heard people say things like, "We've known each other since five years" has reached the point where I can't even tell if that's ungrammatical anymore. (It's kind of like when you repeat a word like 'milk'

over and over again until it starts to sound super weird, or like when your mind goes completely blank when you're trying to figure out if a word like '*significance*' 'significance' is spelled correctly or not.)[16] Either way, after hearing so many different people use 'since' like that over the years, I've come to the conclusion that SAE should probably start doing it too. That way we can say things like, "I've been waiting since two hours" without having to rely on workarounds and helper words by saying, "since two hours *ago*," or "I've been waiting *for* two hours," as if 'two hours' were the name of a person or something. ("Oh, you're waiting for two hours? Well what time did two hours say they'd get here? Don't worry, I'm sure two hours will turn up eventually.")

Eventually.

I get especially *confusey* with this one, because I don't really see how 'eventually' has any business meaning 'after some amount of time' anymore; instead, it should probably be a synonym of 'occasionally' or something. In German, for example, the word *eventuell* means possibly, potentially, or perhaps. That would also make sense because the English phrase "in the event that" is kind of like saying, "if and when [a particular thing were to happen]." Oddly enough, in the collective European Union, the word 'eventual' has a nonstandard alternative definition (meaning it's frequently used in a way that is not recognized by the majority of native English speakers). The alternative definition in this case is 'potential' and/or 'possible,' which makes for an interesting contrast with how native speakers will sometimes use 'eventual' to mean 'inevitable' (as in, "the eventual housing bubble"). Personally, I'm not sure if I've ever witnessed or noticed any Europeans using it that way myself, but either way, I still think it's pretty sweet that an entire region has basically stepped in and said, "Yeah, no, this word needs to mean something else." (Then again, I guess we don't really have any other words that mean 'after some amount of time' or 'at some point someday,' so maybe it was just filling a semantic gap, I don't know.)

Side note: I just used the English classic, "Yeah, no," but there's also its brother,

"No, yeah," and I can't even imagine the level of confusion that non-native speakers encounter when they hear one of those for the first time.

Currently.

This is a weird one because sometimes the line we draw between what's 'current' and what is 'real' can get super blurry (such as your 'current' state of mind versus your 'real' state of mind), and that makes it seem like time and reality are somehow the same thing. (You'll see more of what I mean in a second, but for now just note that in several Romance languages, the translation for the word 'currently' is simply a cognate of the English word 'actually.' Some examples include *attualmente* in Italian, *actualment* in Catalan, and *actuellement* in French).

Actual.

While English typically uses this word to mean real and/or legitimate, many other languages use it to mean current, recent, and/or up-to-date. (You can even toss in some Germanics this time as well, such as *actueel* in Dutch, *aktuell* in Norwegian, and *aktuel* in Danish). As a result, when you 'actualize' something in pretty much any of those other languages, it means to update and/or refresh it. (So like, in German, the verb *aktualisieren* means to update, whereas the common word for 'actually' is actually *eigentlich*.) Meanwhile, 'actualizing' something in English is more like making it happen and/or bringing it into existence—which, in both Spanish and Portuguese you would simply express via the verb *realizar* (aka 'to realize'), because, you know, that AcTUaLLy makes sense.

Realize.

So this is where I think the loop finally closes, because although the predominant English meaning for 'realize' is to have a sudden understanding and/or awareness of something (*which makes no bloody sense once again*), it's also used to mean the same thing as *realizar* (as in, "I recently realized my dream of taking a hundred flights in a year"). Nevertheless, the big story here was never really about how different these translations were (because obviously translations are different sometimes); instead, it's about how these particular differences are able to show us that what is *current*, what is *actual,* and what is *real* are virtually the same thing in English—and that's something I never would've *realized* otherwise.

"Hey, are you at home?"

"In reality, I'm at the mall."

"Actually, I'm at the mall."

"Currently, I'm at the mall."

(*I guess there's a varying degree of matter-of-factness attached to these, but if you can put down the attitude, I think the overall blurriness is still there.*)

Alright, so why is any of this relevant? Well, when it comes to semantic shifts, it's relevant because if you change language, you change meaning, and if you change meaning, you change reality, and if you do that, then you're basically taking a giant semantic dump on the triangle boys' graves. Sorry no, ~~in reality~~ actually it's because it raises an interesting question about whether or not we have to make changes to our language in order to make changes to our way of thinking; on the one hand, if we presume that the origin of human language was just cavepeople pointing, grunting, and imitating animal sounds (which is why

some of the early language speculation theories have funny names like Bow-wow, Pooh-pooh, and Ding-dong), then it probably makes sense that semantic changes were necessary to facilitate our own development. At the same time, if we take the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis seriously, then we should also consider how the absence of change could leave us clinging to older constructions and worldviews of the past.

You can ~~actually~~ currently trace a lot about history just by observing certain surviving aspects of modern languages, and sometimes you don't even have to look very far. In French, for example, just by following the word *souper* ('supper') back to *soupper* in Middle French and then *soper* in Old French, it becomes fairly straightforward that soup (*sope* in Old French and *soupe* in today's French) must have been a staple of evening meals for a very long time. Similarly, you can also look at the Spanish word for a shop/store ('*tienda*') and deduce that most shops were just tents way back in the day. Lastly (but definitely not leastly), I think it's safe to assume that Germans clearly took up the concept of shoes ('*Schuhe*') long before they came up with a word for gloves ('*Handschuhe*').[17]

In the long run, it probably doesn't matter to us when things like that remain the same for centuries, as there's never really been a good enough reason to change them. That said, even when words and expressions become antiquated (such as 'rolling down' a car window or 'rewinding' a movie), it's usually a non-issue for us to hold onto those terms as well. The question is, do we end up continuing to *think* the old way in our heads (as opposed to thinking of 'pressing the window button down' or 'fast-backwarding a movie' or whatever), and if so, would that also be the case when we're dealing with outdated things that actually *do* matter to us?

A decent example of this in English is how the third-person pronoun 'he' can refer both to the masculine and to no gender in particular, whereas 'she' can only refer to the feminine. (And similarly, how the words 'man' and 'guys' can be used as catchalls for things like, "A place where no man has gone before," and

"Do you guys want some cookies?") The implication here is that using the male form as a generic neutral is and/or has been unsuitable due to its inherent gender bias—at least in the sense that it offers a clearly disproportionate representation, since "womankind's first steps on the moon," for instance, neither includes nor precludes any steps by men. At the same time, however, we've also been reluctant to find a way out of this predicament due to modern English's lack of a perfect alternative, since (1) replacing 'he' with 'it' sounds like we're not talking about humans anymore, (2) using 'he or she' is clunky and exhausting when you have to keep repeating it, (3) the idea of alternating between saying 'he' and 'she' can become confusing to the reader sometimes (and it can also make the writer sound like a tryhard), (4) using 'one' and/or the impersonal 'you' doesn't always work stylistically, and (5) replacing 'he' with 'they' violates conventional noun-verb agreement rules. (Of course, since mambo number 5 is easily the best option, that's what we've been rolling with as an informal solution ever since Chaucer was doing it around the 14th century.)

Side note: There's also a bizarre little history about how Americans were surprisingly more opposed to the adoption of the singular 'they' than the British, and that's because the British had already experienced a similar change, whereas the Americans had not. In the UK, people who protested the use of the singular 'they' in the third person were preceded by people who protested the use of the singular 'you' in the second person (which used to be *thou* before *you* took over for both singular and plural). On the whole, this change had just started to take effect in the 1600s, which means that *thou* was already on its way out by the time the Thirteen Colonies were settling in. As a result, the use of *thou* had very little support on American soil, and if anyone said it, it probably meant that he or she was a goddamned Quaker, lol. (Meanwhile, many people in the Yorkshire region of northern England still use *thou* today.)

Getting back to using the masculine form as an all-encompassing neutral, that's probably not the sole cause behind (nor would its removal be a cure for) the existence of misogyny, but when the language itself puts every single non-man in a secondary or even invisible position, that probably doesn't help. (I mean, why else would every anonymous person on the internet today still be assumed as male until proven otherwise?) The thing is, whether we notice it or not, the

mere exposure effect tells us that the more time we spend around certain ideas, the more comfortable we are subscribing to them. It's the same way that a child might bring swear words to school after hearing them over and over again at home. It's also the same way that the more jokes I crack about being attention-starved, the more people will start to believe it. (*Congratulations, I played myself.*)

On the flipside to all of this, the opposite effect can be true as well. In George Orwell's dystopian classic *1984*, he takes this to the extreme by depicting *Newspeak* as a language that's intended "not to extend, but to diminish the range of thought." As a result, the government is able to suppress people's desires for political freedom via the "reduction of vocabulary" (because if Big Brother can manage to remove the heretical meaning of the word 'free' altogether, then citizens would no longer understand freedom well enough to want it in the first place). Granted, all of that seems to rely on a kind of top-down linguistic determinism where people aren't even capable of choosing what to think (so basically the Sapir-Whorf on steroids), but I imagine that most people would prefer to believe we're capable of changing language from the bottom-up as well —it's just that accomplishing it is difficult as fuck whenever virtually *any* kind of human rights are involved, *you know*, because of the rich old white heterosexual male ruling class hula hoops they have to pass through first in order to make it into centralized media.

Do you remember when the word *queer* made a huge comeback in the early 2000s with that show about five gay guys who helped otherwise helpless straight men dress better? (It actually reached second place in its time slot for viewers under 50 at one point, believe it or not). Back then, it was almost as if the network had to reintroduce the word *queer* as this 'new kind of gay' that was seemingly only here to make everyone else's lives better or something. Meanwhile, the road towards becoming more accepting was paved with freshly popularized words such as 'metrosexual' (which at the time simply meant, "I'm both straight *and* I'm brave enough to say that ~~David Beckham is hot~~ there's nothing wrong with borrowing fashion, hygiene, and grooming tips from gay men as long as you and I are both clear that I'm definitely not ~~attracted to David Beckham~~ a gay man myself"), because clearly we couldn't go 'straight' to the

point without protecting our delicate masculinity first—*but like, "no homo" though. (Who could forget saying that?)*

Another interesting factor to all of this is how not every culture changes at the same pace, and that means not all languages do either; I guess you can think of it as how TV networks in some countries may not have been as willing to do an adaptation of the *Queer Eye* show than others. That said, when it comes to the countries that literally *did* do adaptations of the show, most of them gave it a name that translated to something like *Fab Five* (in Greece, Sweden, Italy) or *Team G* (in Portugal and Spain), and I only bring that up because of how bland those are in comparison to Germany's *Schwul macht cool* ("Gay makes cool"). Props to whichever modern-day German Shakespeare came up with that slick rhyme.

Anyhow, over on the less tolerant side of the spectrum, one of the countries whose mainstream media was evidently and unfortunately *not* ready for an adaptation was Brazil.[18] First of all, it's probably important to understand that one of the mainstays of the present day socio-political discourse in Brazil (where I only stepped foot for the first time in 2013, which means my takes are both fresh *and* precipitated) is how prevalent both hetero-machismo values and homophobic sentiments have remained there to this day. Case in point: in 2011, the now sitting president of the country gave an interview (i.e., a real media presser, and not simply a 'locker room conversation') in which he said to journalists, "Nobody likes homosexuals, we put up with them." This was also when he was a member of the nation's House of Representatives (aka *Câmara dos Deputados*).

Now, obviously there are some deeper-seated and more complicated historical, religious, and hegemonic factors at play here (which are probably way more important than anything that guy has to say), but all I'm trying to suggest is that *some* aspects of the country's lexicon may have developed in such a way that inadvertently perpetuated and/or prolonged some of those quote-unquote "values" as well. (*Cough, tomara-que-caia, cough*). I also don't want to go too

far into it, but there's basically a small handful of anorectal-related expressions and/or profanities that are still super common in the day-to-day vernacular in Brazil, and it's usually pretty difficult to dissasociate a lot of them from their anti-gay sentiments even if they're not expressed with the exact same intentions 100 percent of the time anymore. Essentially, the idea here is that a prevalent English phrase such as "Fuck off" just so happens to be less homophobically pointed than the equally prevalent (if not *more* prevalent) "Go take it in the ass" phrase in Brazilian Portuguese, so it would kinda make sense that over the years, one of those two phrases might have contributed to the slowing down of societal progress more than the other. (And then you multiply that by a bunch of other things within the culture, like how heterosexual men will often avoid celebrating their 24th birthdays because that's the 'gay number' according to an old Brazilian card game.)

But if you look beyond all of the historical heteronormativity (since that can be found pretty much anywhere else in the world as well), what's perhaps even more remarkable (to a non-Brazilian) is how *this year*, the country's *biggest* and *most influential* popstar went onstage *several times* to sing a song with another artist whose hit single sat at *number one* on the national charts for *weeks*, and in the chorus of that song *multiple times* is the Brazilian Portuguese equivalent (more or less) of the homophobic f-word in English—and the only public media backlash that song ever really got was about how the lyrics potentially incited gun violence, since the line in question was essentially, "*Did you hear that gunshot, f-word*?"

Quick question: did you assume that the two musical artists were men? (Just wondering.)

So there *is* a caveat I should mention here, and that's how the members of the gay community in Brazil will often use this word as a non-derogatory reference to each other, and that this particular use has also been somewhat normalized for straight women to say as well (similar to how it's been normalized for hispanic and/or latino rappers to say the n-word as long as it's the in-group positive

version with the soft 'a' on the end).[19] That being said, these two Brazilian women were very clearly *not* using the f-word as an in-group positive during this particular song, which you can tell just from how bizarre that would be in the given context. In any case, what's potentially the most revealing part of the story is how *just this month* (ATOW), the song's main artist (i.e., the less famous one) came out with a brand new song (written by the more famous one), only this time it used the word in a clearly over-the-top celebratory fashion—and as far as I can tell, most people saw it as a disingenuous attempt at pandering, since it was essentially a song called, "*You're Nailing It, F-words!*"

Alright, that's probably all I can say about this before it really starts to sound like I'm virtue signaling on behalf of English or whatever (*as if any English-speaking community had already solved the problems of prejudice and/or racism, let alone stopped electing people with a known history of those things to office*). Realistically there's just way too much to unpack about this stuff, and it probably goes well beyond the scope of what I'm woke enough to disentangle anyway.

For instance, way back in 1983, Eddie Murphy went onstage to record his very first stand-up comedy special called *Delirious* (i.e, the one where he wore his famous red leather suit), and in the opening minute of his set, right after he thanks the audience and the band, the literal first line that comes out of his mouth is this: "I got some rules when I throw down, when I do my stand up, I got rules and shit. Straight up, [*f-words*] aren't allowed to look at my ass when I'm onstage." Now, obviously Eddie Murphy wouldn't have to worry about that kind of thing today (because if he said things like that he wouldn't be onstage for very long to begin with), but as a 22-year-old minority in the 80s, how much of that was just him riding the wave of where mainstream comedy was telling him to go?

So I dunno, I guess you can take all of that for what it's worth and then decide how you ultimately want to think about it, but for my money it's at least *possible* for a language to affect the speed at which a culture can change its views on

something, even if it's all just one big feedback loop that gets handed down to us from centralized media. At the end of the day, we're still communicating faster (in every language) than we ever have before, and that means words that were once tolerated for years (e.g., *lunatic*, *retard*) are suddenly capable of being stigmatized overnight. The problem is, most of these changes happen way faster than the average person's understanding of them do (despite how the golden rule has always been to just be decent to one another), so a lot of us, myself included, may not be able to recognize our own lack of perspective until it slaps us in the face sometimes. (Case in point: broadcasters who get fired ~~for saying taboo things on air~~ for being paid to know better and *still* being two-faced assholes on live TV.) Meanwhile, due to the lag in correction time, the trickiest conversations for us to navigate will probably always be the ones that look like this:

Person A: [Says something.]

Person B: "Hey, you shouldn't say that, it's offensive."

Person A: "But I didn't mean it that way."

Person B: "It's not up to you how you meant it."

Person A: "How is it not?"

~~Person B: "Have you ever heard of the semiotic triangle of meaning?"~~

~~Person A: "The what?"~~

So I'd like to move on to some way funner stuff now, but first I just want to reiterate that there's a difference between semantic shifts that are the results of deliberate efforts to tackle social issues, and semantic shifts that are just random-ass changes to non-loaded terms for no good reason—like how we've started to say 'crescendo' to mean "a climax" instead of "a gradual rise towards a climax," which means we now have two climaxes and no crescendos (and that's only good for sex jokes).

Overall, I guess it's fairly straightforward that the vast majority of semantic shifts happen more or less inadvertently, but what's not quite as obvious is how a lot of them are caused by errors in our speech that turn into errors in our writing. This is because we notice and/or tolerate these two things differently. *Bad analogy*: it's kinda like how spoken mistakes in a voicemail are more forgivable than written mistakes in an email. *Better example*: it's harder for us to hear someone say the wrong *to/too/two* than it is for us two read it.

In linguistics, there's actually a difference between an error and a mistake; a mistake is something that speakers are able to identify as being wrong themselves (such as an obvious typo or an accidental slip of the tongue), and they may even self-correct those mistakes on the spot. Alternatively, an error is something that a speaker and/or listener(s) may not even be aware is incorrect, like when somebody uses the word 'badass' to describe a nasty smell, or when the Sicilian master of wits guy uses the word 'inconceivable' in the movie *The Princess Bride*. (Obligatory response from Inigo Montoya: "~~*You killed my father*~~ *You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means*.")

As you can imagine, there's obviously an infinitesimal amount of mistakes and errors that we can make (like when I just tried to use 'infinitesimal' to mean 'infinite'), and fortunately some of them are common enough to have been lumped into categories with funny names. Here's a cherry-picked glossary of the ones that I like:

A *catachresis* is your run-of-the-mill error of misusing a word when we think it means something else, like when someone thinks the word 'screwdriver' refers to a motorist with road rage, or that one time in high school when I tried to use the word 'magnanimous' to mean 'extremely large' in front of the entire class, and then the super smart kid with a slight social handicap literally facepalmed so loud that everyone in the room noticed. (Do you know those involuntary memories that pop up every now and then just to make you cringe for a moment before carrying on with the rest of your day? This one still gets me like once a

year, lol.)

A *spoonerism* is when we swap the sounds of multiple words (either deliberately or unintentionally) to say things like, "Do you want some *belly jeans*," or, "I just hit my *bunny fone*."

A *parapraxis* (aka a Freudian slip) is when we say something that's seemingly so out of place that it sounds like we're subconsciously thinking about something else, like whenever a TV news anchor says the classic "policemen and fire *farters*" line, or that one time a sports reporter accidentally said a football player was dealing with a "bulging *dick* issue" in his back. These don't always have to be crude or sexual, but those are usually the most noticeable (and/or the best).

A *malapropism* is when we say the wrong thing in place of similarly sounding words/expressions that ends up creating something new and oftentimes absurd, such as being back on your old *stumping grounds*, or administering *youth in asia*. The difference between these and parapraxes is that with these, the speaker typically doesn't know that whatever they're saying is wrong, so it's basically the same difference between an error and a mistake. (You can also do this one on *porpoise*, like if you bought a collector's item that came with a certificate of *all ten titties* or something.)

An *eggcornism* is when a malapropism ends up making sense within the same overall context anyway, such as *Old-timer's disease* instead of Alzheimer's, *roastissery chicken* instead of rotisserie, *butt naked* instead of buck naked, *deep-seeded* instead of *deep-seated*, and *hunger pains* instead of hunger pangs. (Fans of the Canadian TV show *Trailer Park Boys* may also know these as Ricky-isms, which are usually aimed at idioms, so they're kinda like getting two birds stoned at once.)

A *mumpsimus* is when someone stubbornly continues to say an eggcorn even after learning about the corrected version, as in, "For all intensive purposes, I could care less that you know all the lyrics to *Bohemian Rap CD*." (That's a triple whammy.)

Speaking of song lyrics, a *mondegreen* is when we mishear them in intelligible ways, such as hearing "Excuse me while I kiss this guy" instead of "Excuse me while I kiss the sky" in *Purple Haze* by Jimi Hendrix. Some other good ones include hearing "Hey there amigo" instead of "Hey where did we go" at the beginning of *Brown Eyed Girl* by Van Morrison, as well as hearing "Snap your bagels" instead of "*Snap yo fingers*" throughout Lil Jon's track of the same name. (That's not a joke, and you absolutely *will* hear it if you listen for it.)

In addition to mishearing things by accident, sometimes we misspeak things on purpose; a *minced oath* is when we change a certain spelling, pronunciation, or even an entire phrase to make cuss words sound less objectionable, such as *gosh darn*, *dagnabbit*, and *son of a biscuit*. (On occasion we'll even create a hybrid of minced oaths and spoonerisms, which can be pretty nucking futs.)

To get the opposite effect, a *tmesis* is when we deliberately insert a typically foulmouthed word or phrase inside of another one, like 'abso-fucking-lutely,' or 'ri-goddamn-diculous.' It's generally pretty rare for us to do this without profanities (which is why they're sometimes called expletive infixes instead), however Shakespeare did give us 'a-whole-nother' thing, and we also mix in minced oaths from time to time as well. (*Yeah, I know, whoop-de-freakin-doo, and la-dee-frickin-da.*)

Somewhat along those lines is a concept you're probably already familiar with, aka *portmanteaus*, which is when we deliberately create a hybrid of two or more words to create a new blended meaning—like how 'smog' is a combination of both *smoke* and *fog*, or how 'turducken' (aka John Madden's Thanksgiving tradition) is a combination of turkey, duck, and chicken. Some other good ones

include *brunch, paratroopers, motel, Brexit, spork,* and the sadly no longer popular *crunk* (which for some reason I really miss saying). Interestingly enough, the word 'portmanteau' is itself a portmanteau (meaning 'coat rack' in French), and it was first introduced in this new sense by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass* during the scene in which Alice has a conversation with none other than Humpty Dumpty, whose antics ultimately went on to inspire an entire theory of meaning.

Fittingly, a *humpty dumpty-ism* is the practice of impudently insisting that a word means whatever you want it to mean whenever you want it to mean it; of course, when Alice challenges this by questioning whether or not Humpty Dumpty can truly do that in good faith, he responds by asking Alice if she thinks people are the masters of words, or if she thinks words are the masters of people.

Over in the artistic license department, a *nonce word* is a term that we just sort of make up on the spot whenever we need help getting our point across, like the aforementioned *fast-backwarding* (as opposed to rewinding), *funner* (which we all know is much gooder than fun), and *sticklery*. Some of the more noteworthy examples include Aldous Huxley's *not-thereness*, James Joyce's *quark* (which went on to inspire the name for the elementary particle discovered at Stanford in the 60s), and the recently resurfaced *bigly* (because apparently the quote, "I know words, I have the best words" was simply a reference to nonce words that only a stable genius would understand. Also, in a *totally unrelated* matter, some other nonce words are *jabroni, confusement,* and *bogosity*—as in, the level or degree at which something is bogus.)

Speaking of trying to sound smart and having it backfire, a *hypercorrection* is when we try to avoid making an error by overcompensating and making one anyway. This would be like saying 'whom' instead of 'who' whenever we're unsure, or overextending Latin-based pluralization rules to turn words like 'bonuses' and 'walruses' into 'boni' and 'walri.' Naturally, these kinds of things are typically much trickier for non-native speakers (since they have to guess a lot of the time), and there are even hypercorrections that are unique to certain

groups. For instance, since Spanish words are a bajillion times more likely to start with the letters 'es' than just an 's' (like how *espacio* and *especial* are the words for 'space' and 'special'), many Spanish speakers will often omit the 'e' from English words by simple force of habit and end up saying things like '-stablishment' and '-scape.' (I can only imagine what this does to the *eself-steem* of people who hate messing up.)

In reverse to that, native speakers are oftentimes just as susceptible to *hyperforeignisms*, which is when we take characteristics found in some foreign words and mistakenly apply them to others (such as how we might say '*habañero*' instead of just *habanero*). In many cases, these bad boys can become so commonplace that they end up taking over as the standard and/or 'correct' way of saying the borrowed word in the non-source language, like how English speakers have modified 'Beijing' to sound more like 'Bei-*zhing*' (with the same 'zh' sound that we also slapped onto the ~~Tazh~~ Taj Mahal), or how our pronunciation of 'lingerie' sort of rhymes with "on the way" in English even though it has only ever rhymed with "lawn jury" when said in French.

Alright, so that's more than enough of those, but the point is, just as a hyperforeignism can slowly make its way towards becoming an official part of our written lexicon, that's how pretty much any regular-ass mistake/error (be it usage, grammar, syntax, spelling, or pronunciation) can too. And at that point, if there's ever any competition between a newer term and an already existing one, whichever one of the two is more technical will almost always yield to the less technical—and that's because fewer and fewer people will be bothered by (or even aware of) the distinction as time goes on. (So like, if 95 out of 100 people had already gotten used to a particular semantic shift, but you, me, and three other snooty two shoes were all sitting there going, "Well, tEChNicaLLy the word *electrocuted* implies death by electricity so what you really mean to say is *shocked* or *electrified*," then the other 95 people would probably be like, "Yeah, well, tEChNicaLLy we don't give a shit, bro.") Having said that, since (again) it's not like we get together and vote on any of these things, most people will just say whatever they think is more suitable for a given audience or context, even when they know it runs counter to proscription. Also, I'm not exactly sure if that ~~tEChNicaLLy~~ qualifies as a mumpsimus (because sometimes we don't

even know we're doing it), but a decent example would be the preference to use "there's" as a substitute for 'there are' in cases where 'there is' lacks grammatical agreement (which surprisingly I'm all about), and there's always the classic case of saying "good" in response to the question of how we're doing (which Tracy Morgan's character on *30 Rock* is *not* about).[20]

By the way, this isn't to say that each and every error that gains popularity will eventually become adopted, because sometimes even the ones that totally deserve it (for repeatedly exposing a flaw in the language or something) don't always break through. I mean, when practically half of all non-native English speakers (plus a sizeable chunk of native speakers) consistently misspell the word 'lose' as 'loose,' that's probably a sign that we should just let it happen (or change the former to 'looze,' or the latter to 'looce,' or both) and be done with the confusion once and for all. Either way, I guess the fact that we already have two different spellings means that we'll just keep things the way they are for the same reason that we won't go out of our way to make any unnecessary changes to other common trouble areas such as *you're/your* and *their/they're/there* (i.e., because they're differences actually serve a legitimate purpose).

On the flipside, one of the unnecessary changes that we most likely *will* be making relatively soon (because it's effectively already happened) is how we'll probably start to accept the common spoken-to-written screw-up that leads people to write 'could of,' 'would of,' and 'should of' instead of the contractions *could've*, *would've*, and *should've*. Now, as heinous as those may be, the truth is that none of them ~~actually~~ currently mean or suggest anything else at the moment, so there wouldn't be anything inherently problematic or even misleading about making them synonymous with their corresponding contractions.[21] As a result, if and when we ultimately adopt the entire 'could of' group as idiomatic alternatives (or whatever), the only difference at that point would be stylistic.

Of course, very few lines of reasoning will ever be able to stop some of us from ~~puking~~ airing out our grievances about changes like that, but at the same time,

very few of our grievances will ever be able to stop changes like that from happening. This is what Lesley and James Milroy (aka the mommy and daddy of sociolinguistics) called the 'complaint tradition' of English; because as long as the language continues to evolve (*which it will*), people will continue to write stuffy blog posts about how English must be in some sort of ugly decline.

Side note: I'm obviously still a bit self-conscious about sounding stuffy myself here, but holy shit, at least I'm not as bad as that guy who edited out 47,000 instances of the phrase 'comprised of' (for being a redundant conflation of 'comprised' and 'composed of') from Wikipedia a few years ago. (*I mean, talk about pissing in the wind, hot damn.*) In any case, despite how common it is for academics, writers, and armchair linguists to piss and moan about how unbridled semantic changes might cause whatever they write to be misunderstood at a later date, there's really nothing they can do about it because once that party starts, that party don't stop. In fact, even George Orwell himself said (for socio-political reasons) that it's actually *more* important for writers to start adhering to new linguistic fuckups as soon as possible. (*I know, right? Should of seen that one coming, as per fucking usual.*)

Anyway, one of the reasons why resistance to those changes tends to be futile (besides the fact that they don't cause the original terminologies to suddenly become wrong or anything like that) is because of how few people it takes to get them started in the first place. Somewhat ~~hindsight~~ coincidentally, just this month (ATOW), a study from UPenn concluded that it only takes 25 percent of a group to adopt a new naming convention before the majority can be expected to follow suit. (This is kinda like the Pareto principle, aka that funny little aphorism about how 80 percent of the work is typically done by 20 percent of the workers —although I guess that's more relevant in situations when there's a collective goal rather than something that people are unknowingly circulating). In the UPenn study, groups of people that previously reached a consensus over the name of a specific person in a photograph were individually exposed to confederates who secretly promoted a different name; when the number of confederates reached roughly 25 percent of the total group size, whatever the established convention was at the beginning could be flipped to the minority.

All in all, I suppose we've known about sociological tipping points for a while now, but when you think about it in terms of linguistic development, there's a couple of things that really stand out about English in particular: one, English has the world's largest group of non-native speakers by at least two times the next highest (Hindi), and two, English has twice as many *non-native* speakers (~750 million) as it does native (~375 million).[22] Of course, it's still kind of impossible to know how much of an effect this has on semantic change, but at the very least I think it ~~begs the question~~ raises the question of whether or not modern English is a bit more prone/susceptible/conducive to 'outside' influences due to all of those moving parts—because if so, wouldn't that also make the idea of taking part in the complaint tradition of English even stupider? (Since it shouldn't even be that *hard* for non-native speakers to cause an ~~occasional~~ *eventual*[23] change.)

But of all languages, English is already one of the worst you could ever choose to get upset about anyway, since (*rumor has it*) it's not even a language in the first place; instead, English is three languages stacked on top of each other hiding underneath a trenchcoat. (As for which three, let's go with Anglo-Saxon aka Old English, Norman French, and OG Latin.) I mean, just look at of all these words that are the exact same things in their respective Proto-Germanic and Latinate origins: belly and abdomen, ask and inquire, choose and select, before and prior, understand and comprehend. How about some slightly more recent pairs of Anglo-Saxon and Old French? Ache and pain, snake and serpent, gift and present, brittle and frail, forgive and pardon.

If there's ever a real difference between any of those pairs, that's usually the result of our own semantic narrowing after the fact, otherwise it's just a way for us to sound all Latin and fancy. In fact, the deeper into the vault of English you go, the more of these 'advanced' words you'll recognize as common terms in other languages with similar roots. In Portuguese, for example, the word for a device/appliance is *aparelho,* and that's clearly related to 'apparatus' in English. In Italian, the word *quotidiano* means daily, and that's a near-perfect cognate with the lesser-known 'quotidian.' In French and Romanian, the word for 'scar'

is *cicatrice*, and this one *is* a perfect cognate with the virtually unknown 'cicatrice/cicatrix' in English. In Spanish, the word *pregunta* means 'question,' and the English equivalent for that one is 'percontation' (which is now obsolete, but it's still there nonetheless). And lastly, in German, Swedish, and Catalan (to name a few), the words *Fenster*, *fönster*, and *finestra* all mean 'window,' while in English, 'defenestration' is the act of throwing something out of one.

Pro tip: you can also use this to your advantage, because if you're ever in the middle of speaking a predominately Latin-based language and you forget a word for something, all you have to do is think of the most pretentious-sounding word that means the same thing in English, and then convert that into the other language as best you can. *Can't think of a word for 'playful' in Portuguese?* Give 'jocular' a shot. *Jocoso?* That'll work. (The odds of this succeeding are a lot higher than you would expect. I mean, they're still really low, but not that low.)

Have you ever come across one of those articles about "The 10 words in [another language] that don't exist in English" and wondered why it's never the other way around? First of all, those articles probably wouldn't have been written in English (so it's unlikely that you'd have seen them anyway), but secondly, if it's already a challenge to make a list of words that English *doesn't* have, then the lists in the other direction must go on for miles, right? The point is, when all of your words come from three major origins (plus you have additional influence from the Greeks and, *well*, Shakespeare), then it kinda makes sense that you'd have most of the bases covered. At the end of the day, English is simply a Frankenstein language made up of words it adopted like ~~Brad and Angelina~~ an indiscriminate sponge. *That's* why nobody bats an eye at macaronic sentences like, "We ate tofu lasagna during our rendezvous with the Czech ombudsman yesterday" (which is a mixture of words that English ganked from Japanese, Italian, French, Polish, and Swedish). That's also why English spelling is impossible and you never see spelling bees in other languages (although you *do* see other things, like transcription accuracy contests in French, and dictionary look-up races in Chinese). And that's also why I still have no idea how to say the name of the sparkling water brand *La Croix* out loud.[24]

Hell, even when you *think* you've stumbled upon one of those rare Pokemon of nonexistent words, English always seems to have a way of clapping back at you, Pikachu. I'll never forget a conversation I once had with a Brazilian friend who was venting about how there wasn't a good translation for the Portuguese word *arrastão*, which is a type of crime where a group of hoodlums go running through a crowded area (usually a beach or a tunnel) while stealing everything they can along the way. The problem was, not only did we look it up and find out that she could've called it a 'flash rob,' a 'steaming' (*in the UK*), or maybe even just a 'raid,' but we also found out that *arrastão* itself was just a repurposing of another Portuguese word for a fishing net that boats drag through water to catch things along the way (so that felt just as cheap to me as 'flash rob' did to her). In any case, even if there hadn't been an English translation whatsoever, I'd probably have been like, "Yeah, well, you guys say 'feet fingers' because you don't have a word for toes."

Side note: I don't mean to sound like I think English is superior or whatever again, because if anything I feel the opposite. In fact, (*lame story but*) I remember writing a term paper in college arguing against English being the global lingua franca (despite how it was already eons too late due to things like unified medical practices and how English became the de facto language of international aviation so that pilots and air traffic controllers could always communicate), and I only bring that up now because of the hindsight coincidence that I ~~wrote~~ tried to write that paper in Spanish during my very last course before dropping the subject. Needless to say it didn't turn out very bueno, and that's probably because I thought it was a good idea to base my entire argument upon an old article from *The Economist* about how English spelling is so irregular that you could rewrite the word 'potato' by spelling it *ghoughpteighbteau*. (I know, right? How is that not A+ material? Also, that spelling is derived from the *gh - ough - pt - eigh - bt - eau* sounds you can get from words like *hiccough, though, pterodactyl, neigh, debt*, and *bureau*, respectively.) Furthermore, that entire article was just an ad absurdum example of a previous criticism by spelling-reform advocates who mockingly spelled the word 'fish' as '*ghoti*' in the 1800s (which was eventually picked up by James Joyce in *Finnegans Wake*, and it also went on to become the literal word for fish in Klingon, a semi-fictional language from Star Trek).

So anyway, as if the shameless grifting from other languages weren't already enough, the fact that English ultimately *did* become the world's most spoken language means that it also started to send a lot of words back—and that's made for a pretty weird dynamic over the years, since now it's the ~~flash robber~~ borrower doing the bulk of the lending. As a result, whenever a new discovery or trend or technology breaks onto the scene these days, English is usually the one that gets to pick a name for it (if only by spreading it around the fastest). Once that happens, however, every other language that interacts with English is thereby faced with a choice: either adopt that new foreignism exactly how it appears in English as a loanword (which in this case is called an Anglicism), or supplant it with something else. That said, sometimes it can be really tricky for a language to decide which words to adopt and which ones to replace, and the corny reason for that is because languages don't make decisions, their speakers do. (*Lol, sorry if that was misleading. I guess it's just easier to say it that way sometimes.*)

Question: Do you remember that whole 'rabbithole of contact linguistics' thing I mentioned back at the beginning? Well, believe it or not, this is probably where all of that starts—but don't worry because loanwords are *the fucking best*.

Alright, so there are a number of different approaches to borrowing words and/or meanings from another language. English, as we all know, is an enormous slut, so it usually just leaves its foreignisms exactly the way they are in their source languages (give or take a few accent/diacritical marks), such as *Doppelgänger, Kindergarten, papier-mâché, résumé, maelström, yoğurt, piñata*, and *smörgåsbord*. Of course, there's obviously a great deal of convenience that comes with doing things this way, but again, that also leaves us with the aforementioned clusterfuck of spelling and pronunciation due to gems like *bologna, khaki, colonel, champagne, alcohol, segue, entourage, asthma, leprechaun, vacuum, epitome, moped, chaos, piranha, guerrilla*, and ~~*mip*~~ *diarrhea*. Interestingly enough, this wasn't always the case, because back when Middle English was importing a ~~shitload~~ mipload of its words from Old French, many of them were modified to fit the look and feel of the rest of the language.

(So like, *demoiselle* was changed to *damsel*, and *bataille* was changed to *battle*.) In some languages, this method of naturalization is straight up required before a foreignism can be added to their official lexicon, and when it comes to borrowing words from languages that have non-alphabetic scripts (such as *gung ho, feng shui*, or *bok choy* in Chinese, and *tsunami, futon*, or *tycoon* in Japanese), that's pretty much the only option available.

All in all, it's probably true that the majority of naturalized foreignisms are unremarkable in the grand scheme of things, but it can still be kinda neat sometimes to trace a word like 'pretzel' back to *Brezel* in German, or to find out that 'kangaroo' is an anglicized version of the word *gaŋurru/gangurru* from a lesser-known Australian Aboriginal language called Guugu Yimithirr.[25] Also, if you've ever wondered why cookies are called 'cookies' instead of 'bakies' (seeing as we bake them as opposed to cooking them), the answer is because 'cookie' is just a loanword from Dutch, and the original (i.e., *koekje*) means 'little cake.'

On the flipside, since most languages (*I guess*) aren't as hodgepodgey as English, it's usually a bit easier to spot Anglicisms in the wild (even for non-English speakers), simply because of how out of place they may look and/or sound with respect to the rest of the language. For example, even after naturalization, the words *nocaut* and *nocaute* (i.e., 'knockout' in Spanish and Portuguese) don't exactly fit the phonological molds of their respective languages. Similarly, the English word 'cocktail' has also been loaned out to at least twenty different languages, and that's funny because English etymologists haven't even been able to figure out where that shit came from in the first place. (I like the theory that it was originally inspired by drinks that were served in egg-cups, seeing as the French word for one of those is *coquetier*, but I obviously have zero historical knowledge about this.) In any case, perhaps the best foreignism of all-time (in my opinion) is how Italian-Americans mockingly picked up the term *sanemagogna* as a way of poking fun at regular-ass Americans for saying the minced oath 'son of a gun' instead of just swearing. It's either that or *boifurendo* in Japanese.

Nevertheless, while some ~~languages~~ speakers don't particularly mind the foreign-sounding aspects of loanwords, others want absolutely nothing to do with them. In fact, due to the sheer lopsided volume of Anglicisms in particular, many cultures have developed a strong distaste for English words altogether —*because the more and more loanwords a language adopts, the less and less it sounds like itself (and not everybody wants their language to sound like tofu lasagna*). This is probably what Goethe was talking about when he said, "The violence of a language is not that it rejects the foreign, but that it devours it." I think it's also the reason why the German word *Denglish* (i.e., a portmanteau of *Deutch* and English) is typically used as a derogative despite how the English word 'Spanglish' is more like a cutesy little "I don't really *hablar español* but I'm trying my *besto*" kind of thing in comparison.

In any case, although some of the animosity towards Anglicisms has to do with how the words sound, most of it has historically been about the foreign worldviews and ideologies they represent; in other words, due to how a language embodies the cultural and/or national identity of its speaking community, many nations (particularly Germany and France) feared that adopting Anglophone naming conventions would pose a threat to their own values and traditions— *because who wants to shift closer to a worldview that thinks America is god's gift to the planet, am I right?*[26] Of course, the fear of linguistic imperialism is not a recent development by any means (and the vast majority of these concerns were aimed at French up until the 19th century), but there *is* a certain degree of irony regarding the way history has ultimately played out: because if North America had fallen under Gallic rule long ago, it's very likely that French, *not English*, would've been the world's *lingua franca* today. (And it's also pretty neat how *lingua franca* is a loanword from Italian that we still say today despite how *lingua anglica* would probably be more accurate.) Meanwhile, although the Germans began to ease up on their linguistic purification efforts at some point during the 20th century (no comment about their *other* purification efforts back then), the French are *still* dropping the banhammer on English loanwords fairly consistently. Get a load of this:

Remember how I kept saying that we don't exactly vote on English words and whatnot? Well, they do in France, because back in 1966, then prime minister

Georges Pompidou created *le Haut Comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française* ('The High Commission for the Defense and Expansion of the French Language') as a way of protecting French from what he called "*la barbarie linguistique*" ('linguistic barbarism').[27] Ever since then, whenever a new foreignism gains significant traction among the French population, this group is likely to get together and try to whip up a replacement coinage for it (also known as a *loan creation*). Unfortunately, since most regular citizens are still inclined to say whatever they think works best for a given situation, some loan creations catch on far better than others. For instance, one coinage that seems to have done fairly well is how the English word 'hacker' was replaced by the French term for a 'meddler' or 'furrower.' Meanwhile, the commission's repeated efforts at eradicating the word 'smartphone' have been a total disaster; first they tried calling it an *ordiphone* (i.e., a hybrid with *ordinateur*, the French word for a computer), but that didn't stick. Next they tried changing it to *terminal de poche* ('pocket terminal'), and that didn't stick either. Finally, at the beginning of this year (ATOW), the commission announced that it would be moving forward with the term *mobile multifonction* (which I'm guessing will actually stick this time, but only because they're letting people say *mobile* for short). Also, one more thing: the commission itself has ironically and/or fittingly been renamed four times (for a total of five different names) in roughly fifty years. These days it's called "The General Delegation for the French language and the languages of France."

Alright, so now that we've gotten the extremes out of the way (thanks to English being a tramp and French being a prude), that leaves all of the gooey fun stuff in the middle. For example, rather than borrowing foreign terms exactly the way they are, another approach is to create direct word-for-word translations for them known as calques, such as how 'basketball' in Italian is *pallacanestro* ('ballbasket'), or how 'hot dog' in Spanish is *perro/perrito caliente* ('dog/doggy hot'). Of course, sometimes it's tough to know for sure whether or not a word is a calque due to the possibility of two or more languages coming up with the same ideas independently, but at other times it's blatantly obvious, like when you see how many languages have calqued 'wisdom tooth' from Latin, or 'honeymoon' from English, or 'flea market' from French, or 'brainwash' from Chinese. Additionally, it's also fairly common for these things to get tangled up when they go from one language to another, like how 'potpourri' is a loanword from French to English despite how *pot pourri* itself is a calque of *olla podrida*

('rotten pot') from Spanish to French. And shit, while we're at it, 'calque' itself is a loanword from French to English (meaning a trace or a copy), and 'loanword' itself is a calque of *Lehnwort* from German. (Did I not say this stuff was gooey? It gets even better.)

Similarly but slightly different, another method of borrowing is to create something called a *loan blend*, which is when you mix and match elements of foreignisms (be it a full word or just a clipping) with those of native words, ultimately resulting in things like ice*berg*, *ordi*phone, liver*wurst*, soup *du jour*, and cape *verde*. I suppose that these are kinda like multilingual portmanteaus, and German is particularly well-known for having some nifty ones with English, such as *Crashkurs* ('crash course'), *Quellcode* ('source code'), and of course, *Kickboxhandschuhe* ('kickboxing gloves').[28] Once again, however, these bad boys are also capable of getting all tangly wangly between languages, and here's a particularly funky one: the English term 'karaoke' is a loanword from Japanese (meaning ~~'shitfaced singalong'~~ 'empty orchestra'), however the 'oke' part was originally just a clipping of the previously borrowed 'orchestra' from English. Thus, not only does that make 'karaoke' a loan blend, but it also couldn't have been created without ~~copious amounts of alcohol~~ that initial outbound loan in the first place. See what I mean?

Okay, next up are *loan renderings*, and once again these are *almost* like calques, however this time the foreignisms are paraphrased (for whatever reason) to fit their destination languages slightly better. One of the most commonly cited examples of a loan rendering is how the English word 'skyscraper' has been adapted into over 50 languages (and not all of them thought 'sky' or 'scraper' was a good fit). Some of the renderings I like include 'sky kisser' in Hindi, 'cloud scratcher' in German, 'sky ripper' in Bosnian, 'cloud splitter' in Icelandic, 'sky piercer' in Turkish, and last but not least, 'clouds rammer' in Arabic.

Having fun yet? Here's another good one:

The word 'roller coaster' is a straight up Anglicism in a bunch of languages (e.g., Japanese, Greek, Malay, Korean, and Romanian), however in several other languages its translation is a calque of the French term *montagnes russes* ('Russian mountains'). This coinage was inspired by the giant ice slide attractions they had in St. Petersburg during the 16th century (which were also called 'sliding mountains' in Russian). Later on, when the first ride with actual cars locked onto tracks came to Paris, the French simply carried on using the *montagnes russes* term, and nearby contact languages stood pat as well. Finally, when that newer style of rides became popularized in the US, by the time they made their way over to Russia, the Russians decided to name them *amerikanskie gorki* ('American slides').

Moving on, rather than always borrowing both a word and its meaning together, sometimes we only borrow the meaning via what's called a *loanshift*. This is when a foreign terminology influences an already existing native word to take on a new meaning, like when English decided to use the word 'mouse' as the term for handheld computer pointing devices and then thirty other languages pounced on it (*yes, like cats*) by doing the same. Overall, this is generally the preferred method of borrowing words that have been repurposed for digitalizations, but it's also happened with words like 'star' (for which many languages have added the meaning of 'a famous entertainer'), and another highly relevant example is how German, Italian, Romanian, and French have all added the "to become aware of something" meaning to their respective verbs of *realisieren, realizzare, realiza,* and *réaliser*. (I guess it bears repeating that "the violence of a language is not that it rejects the foreign, but that it devours it.")

Side note: something else that's important to keep in mind here is that every language is quote-unquote "alive" in its own right, and that means that any and all of its borrowings are subject to the same semantic changes as native words. As a result, some loanwords will lose their meanings over time, some will develop new and unique meanings all on their own, and some will even be replaced by similar loanwords from different languages altogether. *Schadenfreude,* for example, is a fairly well-known import from German into

English (having to do with the enjoyment of witnessing someone else's misfortune), but apparently the word 'epicaricacy' (which supposedly meant the exact same thing) was previously borrowed from Greek and is now long since forgotten. Additionally, sometimes a language can even re-borrow the exact same word it once previously loaned out, like how the word 'ketchup' is said to have made an around-the-world journey from the Hokkien language in southeastern China (where it started out as a fermented fish sauce called *kue-tsiap*) to Malay, to Dutch, to English (where the fishy ingredients were gradually replaced by sweetened tomatoes), back to Asia via Japanese (which rendered it as *kechappu*), and then finally home to the Hokkien language as *khe-tsiap-puh*. (Crazy, right? It's like the world's longest game of telephone tag.) Here's one I think is even better:

In French, the English word 'toast' (aka grilled slices of bread) was introduced as an Anglicism in the late 1700s. (*They still had grilled bread in France, just not a singular word for it.*) Around that same time, however, the French also borrowed the secondary meaning of 'toast' (aka celebratory drinks in honor of someone or something), which I suppose you might call a loanshift depending on how and when and in what order all of that went down. In any case, what's wild about this is how the English word 'toast' was originally borrowed from the Old French word *tostée,* and *that* referred to a piece of roasted bread dipped in wine for what was traditionally done during what we would now call a toast. Therefore, this means that at some point during the 400 or so years between the end of Old French and the 1700s, not only did the speakers of French loan out their own word, forget about it, and then unknowingly reborrow it later, but they *also* did so with the social custom that came along with it. Meanwhile, to top it all off with some powdered sugar, the fact that this became lost on everyone over time (because nobody lives that long) is kind of funny when you consider how the American breakfast dish that's commonly referred to as 'French toast' is typically called *pain perdu* (aka 'lost bread') in French. Can't explain that!

Okay, so clearly there are some unexpected results when it comes to these things every now and then, but the fun doesn't stop there. Another unintended side-effect of contact linguistics is that it can also produce *pseudo loanwords*, which is when a language borrows and uses foreign words (and/or clippings) in ways

that are no longer common (or never even existed) in their original source languages. The word 'playback,' for example, is a false Anglicism that means 'lip-sync' in over a dozen languages, and the same can also be said of the word 'smoking,' which at least 14 languages have borrowed as their term for 'tuxedo' (because apparently somebody once thought it'd be a clever clipping of the term 'smoking jacket,' which caught on, and then all of those other languages followed suit). Of course, most pseudo loanwords like these are completely innocuous, but that doesn't mean they don't sound silly to native speakers—like how *baskets* is the word for sneakers in French, or how *shopping* is the word for a mall in Portuguese, or how *farmer* is the word for denim jeans in Hungarian. That said, I think the most popular one I've come across (so far) in German is the word *Handy*, which was originally coined for handheld and/or cordless phones; the problem is, *Handy* is still the German word for cellphones and/or ~~pocket terminals~~ smartphones today, and even though most of my friends in Berlin are willing to admit how dumbphone that sounds (*not to mention that it's also slang for a hand job in some places*), by now the Germans have gotten so used to it that it's probably past the point of no return. In comparison, the Swedish term '*freestyle*' was once borrowed to be the word for a portable CD/cassette player, and that just so happened to die out when the devices themselves did—so in that case the Swedes simply lucked out with a ~~handy~~ happy ending.

So in the interest of fairness, there's obviously a ~~shit ton~~ mip ton of foreign terms that English has goofed up as well. In French, for example, people say *cul de sac* (literally the butt end of a bag or a sack) in reference to a dead-end, whereas in English, a cul-de-sac is typically the circle at the end of a neighborhood street where cars can turn around and children can play. Fun fact: in many of JRR Tolkien's books set in Middle Earth, he used the name Bag End (i.e., a made-up calque of *cul de sac*) as a way of poking fun at his fellow Brits for their overuse of French expressions. Speaking of which, another fun fact is that the English expression 'double entendre' bears no meaning in French (since French speakers would say "*double sens*" to express what the English phrase means), and the same can be said for *nom de plume* ('pen name'), which doesn't exist in French either, despite how it was inspired by *nom de guerre*, the previously borrowed term for a wartime pseudonym. In more modern times, the English word 'parkour' was similarly inspired by *parcours du combattant* (meaning a 'military obstacle course'), but because that doesn't exist in French

either, it's probably a toss-up between what they think is more silly: the word, or the activity it represents. Likewise, some Germans might think that an English speaker who drinks from a 'stein' must be living under one, since that's the German word for a rock and/or a stone—and that material hasn't been used for making drinkware since the invention of glass, probably. (Don't quote me on that.) On a related note, I've also overheard Brazilians make fun of English speakers for saying 'glass' instead of 'cup' before, and I guess that's the same criticism we would get for saying *stein*. (*Please excuse me while I go get a plastic of water.*)

Still, out of all the quirky examples that exist, I think the most interesting one I've ever encountered was when I suddenly ~~became aware of~~ realized that the English word for table football/soccer ('foosball' aka F*ußball*) is not only a pseudo loanword from German, but the German word for table football (*Kicker*) is also a pseudo loanword from English. I have absolutely no idea if there's *ever* been another case where two languages have effectively traded false foreignisms for the same exact thing like that—however, I *do* know that the French word for table football is yet another silly-sounding false Anglicism: *baby-foot*.

Okay, so that just about wraps things up when it comes to loanwords, but there's still one last thing that fits into the picture, and that's *folk etymologies*. These can get a bit confusing sometimes (because they're essentially a mixture of loanwords, malapropisms, and urban legends), but in general a folk etymology has to do with two things: one, a popularly held misconception about a word's origin based on some kind of connection or history that people *think* exists (but doesn't), and two, the widespread modification and/or adoption of an existing and/or new word as a direct result of that misunderstanding. For instance, when I was a little kid, I was 100 percent convinced that the word 'coleslaw' was somehow derived from 'cold slop' in medieval English or something, but as it turns out it's just an anglicization of the literal Dutch word for cabbage salad, *koolsla*. Of course, that's not exactly a popularly held misconception, but for the sake of my childhood let's just pretend that enough people started to believe in the same made-up backstory as I did until one day 'cold slop' became the new English word for coleslaw. *That* would be a folk etymology. See what I mean? [29]

In general, folk etymologies typically only happen with words that are foreign, old-fashioned, or scientific, and the underlying principle here is that people have a tendency to misinterpret unfamiliar things in ways that are still familiar to them (just like the eggcorns and mondegreens from earlier); we take what doesn't make sense to us and then we smush it into terms that *do* make sense. That's why we don't even hesitate before we wrongfully assume that a word like 'emoji' (which is a full-on loanword from the Japanese term for 'picture character') must've been derived from the similarly-looking English words like emotion and/or emoticon, however that particular resemblance is purely coincidental. (*Weird, right*?) It's also why we took the Spanish word for 'cowboy' aka *vaquero* and turned it into 'buckaroo' by mistake. It's also the reason why tennis players say 'love' instead of 'zero' (since *l'oeuf* means 'the egg' in French, and that's similar to how 'goose egg' is sometimes used to mean 'zero' in English). Brain exploded yet? Here, have some more (and you'll notice that they all sound like normal English compound words despite how none of them make any sense when you really think about them): *caterpillar*, *mushroom*, *checkmate*, *starboard*, *warlock*, *penthouse*, *seersucker*, and assuming that theory I mentioned earlier is true, *cocktail*. (Also, I left out the word *piggyback* because I thought you might argue with me on that one, but if you're truly honest with yourself, that doesn't make any sense either. Pigs don't do that.)

Speaking of not making any sense, English has a few gibberish-oriented words with some unusual origins as well (and I'm not sure if these should count as their own category of folk etymologies, malapropisms, or nonce words, but I'm bringing them up now anyway). One of them is the term *mumbo jumbo*, which apparently came out of a misunderstanding over the Mandikan word *maamajombo*, meaning a masked dancer who takes part in religious ceremonies. Another gibberish word is *gobbledygook*, and this one was coined by a state representative of Texas who argued that unintelligible language sounded like turkeys gobbling. (He was obviously a bar bar barbarian).

As for folk etymologies in *other* languages, those obviously don't provide the same wow factor to non-native speakers (so it wouldn't be very entertaining for

me to share a list of them), but I will say that my brain finally exploded for good the day I suddenly understood why the cheeseburgers that you can buy from street food vendors in Brazil were called *X-búrguers*: because not only is the letter 'x' pronounced a bit like 'sheesh' and/or 'sheez' in Portuguese, but that sound is also pretty close to how a Brazilian who is unfamiliar with English pronunciation would most likely say the word 'cheese' upon encountering it for the first time. This means that someone was either writing down what they *thought* they heard one day, or they simply invented a brand new shorthand out of ~~sheez~~ sheer convenience, and either way the resulting name of *X-búrguer* spread like wildfire until it eventually made its way onto menus at some fancy restaurants. Furthermore, what makes all of this even more fascinating (to me, at least) is how the term 'hamburger' itself was originally a German loanword for a meat patty named after the city of Hamburg (similar to how frankfurters are named after Frankfurt, or how Cuban sandwiches are named after ~~Elián González~~ Cuba), but somewhere along the way a folk etymology popped up where people would mistake the 'ham' part of the word as a former main ingredient of the sandwich (which was very clearly made of beef). Thus, '*hamburg*-er' was reinterpreted as '*ham*-burger,' and then people started to create new blends (such as cheese-burger and veggie-burger) out of that. What came next, of course, was that English speakers never even managed to replace hamburger with 'beef-burger' (or whatever else), and that's probably because 'burger' ended up becoming a standalone clipping on its own, despite how *Bürger* is the German word for citizen. (So I guess that also explains why *Bürgermeister* means 'mayor' even though my cold, sloppy, childhood self always thought it meant 'hamburglar').

Btw, the term 'folk etymology' is a calque of the German word, *Volksetymologie*. Just saying.

Alrighty then. So even with all of these options for borrowing words and then goofing them up, there are still words that English ultimately doesn't have—after all, those articles about '10 words that don't exist in English' *do* exist. Having said that, here's a few that stood out to me:

In Scottish/Scots, the word *tartle* means the act of hesitating while introducing someone because you've forgotten their name.

In Buli (a language spoken in Ghana), *pelinti* is what we do to avoid burning our mouths after biting into something that's super hot; it's the act of moving high-temperature food around in your mouth (and sucking air like a jet engine) in hopes of cooling it down.

In Portuguese, a *panelaço* is a form of protest in which loads of ~~burgers~~ citizens open their apartment windows and bang pots and pans together so that nobody in the neighborhood can hear the bullshit being spoken on television by a highly disliked politician. (These are super fun btw, and they're also called *caceroladas*/*cacerolazos* aka 'casseroles' in Spanish.)

In Japanese, *honne* is how we feel on the inside, but *tatemae* is how we tell people we feel in public. (The Japanese don't view either one of these to be more honest than the other, they're simply acknowledging that there are two separate parts of reality—kind of like the difference between individual meaning and socially constructed meaning).

In German, *Verschlimmbessern* (i.e., literally 'to dis-improve') is when you try to make something better and end up making it worse. (This word is my spirit animal.)

Side note: I wasn't sure if any of those big-ass German compound words like *Unabhängigkeitserklärungen* (or as Mark Twain put it, 'independencedeclarations') should even count, but after the whole *Handy* debacle, screw it, they deserve it. Here's two more:

Erklärungsnot refers to a situation in which you have to come up with a credible explanation very quickly in order to justify your actions, sort of like when a character in a sitcom gets caught in the wrong place at the wrong time and has to say, "It's not what it looks like!"

And lastly in German, a *Handschuhschneeballwerfer* ('glove-snowball-thrower') is someone who wears gloves to a snowball fight, and in practice it supposedly refers to a cowardly person who likes to criticize from a safe distance. (Is it possible to have two spirit animals?)

So all of those are pretty fun as gimmicks, but they're not exactly words we'd use on a *quotidian* basis, right? When it comes to that sort of thing, I think one of the most useful little nuggets of Portuguese, German, and Spanish is how they all have a single compound word that means 'the day before yesterday' (i.e., *anteontem, Vorgestern,* and *anteayer,* respectively). I absolutely looooove ~~Califooooornia~~ how efficient those are. Also, oddly enough, German even has a word for 'the day after tomorrow' (*Übermorgen*), but for whatever reason Portuguese and Spanish do not. Is that because German-speakers are more likely to plan ahead while the others are more likely to live in the moment or something? (*I have no idea, I'm just making this up*.) In all likelihood it's probably because the Portuguese and Spanish words wouldn't be very natural-sounding if they were formed the same way as the other compounds (since "*poisamanhã*" and/or "*pósmanhã*" and/or "*puésmañana*" all look like shit, for example), and if that's the case then it might also explain why Italian has a single compound word for the day after tomorrow (*dopodomani*) but not one for the day before yesterday (*l'altro ieri*).

[Update: It has since been brought to my attention that the words 'ereyesterday' and 'overmorrow' used to get the job done before they went obsolete, so perhaps they're simply not as useful as I thought. Either way I just got clapped by English.]

But if we're really going to split hairs here (*which we obviously are*), there's still the question of whether or not a word should ever count as 'non-existent' simply because there isn't a nice and tidy one-word translation for it; it's the same thing the other way around. I mean, the word 'wink' doesn't *really* exist in Portuguese, yet speakers can still say 'blink with one eye' no problem if they *really* have to. (Although in this particular case they *don't* have to because 'blink' is another one of those 'shade vs shadow' type of words for which the surrounding context tells the listeners which one it means every time anyway, as in, "That lady blinks a lot when she talks," or "Omg, she just blinked at me").[30] In any case, the concept of winking still exists in Portuguese (as do its implications, *blink blink*), so I guess what we're really looking for here are the so-called 'untranslatables,' which are words that you supposedly have to speak the other language in order to truly understand.

In my experience with Portuguese (*shocker*), people in Brazil are usually pretty quick to ~~beat it into you~~ point out that there's no way of translating the word *saudade* (which is sort of like a nostalgic sense of longing and/or wistfulness), because to them, there's an enormous difference between the meaning of "I miss you" (which would just be "I sense/feel your absence" in Portuguese) and the way *saudade* can be used to express a similar albeit much more intense emotion (which usually gets back-translated as "missing" anyway). The big difference (in my opinion) is that *saudade* is a noun, so in that sense it's something that you can 'feel' (*like when you spontaneously miss someone*), it's something that you can 'have' and/or 'be with' (*like a more permanent homesickness type of thing*), and it's even something that you can 'kill' (*e.g., by finally catching up with an old friend*). I think a good way of looking at it is that 'nostalgia' is typically a fond sentimental yearning for someone or something from the past, whereas *saudade* is the weight and/or pain we feel in the present as a result. (Just know that however you translate it, it won't be good enough.)

Overall, I don't think it's too far-fetched to need to speak a language before you can truly 'get' some of its words, but I also don't think that excludes you from being able to use them properly either. I mean, I'm a native English speaker and I don't really know what the word 'behooves' means, yet I'm pretty sure I can still get away with using it in a sentence; same goes for the word 'formidable'

(which as far as I know is just the go-to adjective for describing worthy opponents). Anyway, in spite of all that, what I think *is* really freaky about untranslatables is that sometimes you end up being able to use a word in a second language that you can't even figure out how to explain in your first (because the embedded/underlying concept for it doesn't translate either). To me, *that's* what an untranslatable really is, and to this day that's how I feel about the Portuguese verb *cobrar*:

In one sense of the word *cobrar*, it simply means to charge (as in monetarily). In another sense, it means to make someone follow through on an obligation and/or keep their word on a promise. In the specific sense that I'm talking about, however, it means something similar to that second one, but I've never quite been able to articulate it in English (or in any other language for that matter). It's when somebody (typically a partner in a relationship) gets on your case (or hints at the idea of getting on your case) about something (typically a behavior that they want from you), which they may or may not have explicitly stated beforehand, and they may or may not also be revealing it to you in a passive-aggressive way. (*Just bear with me because I don't know wtf I'm talking about either and I'm not even ~~beefing~~ hamming this up for the effect*). I've honestly been thinking about this word for years now, and the best explanation I can come up with is that it must sit somewhere in between the two concepts of demanding and expecting. On the one hand, it's definitely not as forceful as making an overt demand, yet on the other, it's definitely not as weak as having an implied expectation—and I just don't think English has anything to fill that particular gap in the same way. Like, it's not pressuring, it's not nagging, it's not pestering, or badgering, or bugging, it's not jamming somebody up, it's not harping on anything, and it's not holding someone accountable…it's just *cobrar-ing*.

So I don't know, I guess there's just a nuance to it that for the life of me I can't put into English in a way that satisfies me as a native speaker, and the only conversations I've ever been able to find online about it (which in this case were on a Brazilian forum for people learning English) were some of those disappointingly awkward internet comment threads in which one person responds to another person's question in such a way that clearly demonstrates (to

you as a third-party observer) that the second person did not understand what the first person was truly asking and/or saying, however neither of them recognizes this, so they both double down on their own misaligned talking points until the entire conversation devolves into a completely off-topic pissing contest about how there's no such thing as a right answer or some shit because language is in the eye of the beholder. In any case, the fact that the internet doesn't even have an answer still leaves me with the constant and insufferable tip-of-the-tongue feeling whenever I try to translate it myself, and none of my native English friends who speak Portuguese (and vice-versa) have been able to ~~understand why I care~~ figure it out either—which is probably why we all just say *cobrar* in both languages whenever it comes up anyway.

But as maddening (and completely trivial) as all of that is, I still think the more interesting question here is whether or not I would've ever developed that specific concept in the first place if I hadn't learned it through Portuguese, right? I mean, that's not to say I never would've experienced *cobrar-ing* (nor felt *saudade*) otherwise, it's just that I never would've interpreted an apposite situation and/or my feelings to be like that, because for whatever reason, that particular option just doesn't exist in the English-speaking lexicon and therefore worldview. (At least, not to the point where we've put a label on it that everyone knows and understands.) Meanwhile, it's not like the quote-unquote "untranslatable" sense of *cobrar* will ever be significant enough to cross over the contact language bridge to become a loanword either, so at the end of the day we're simply left with a subtlety that's been nailed with so much finesse by Brazilian Portuguese that nothing English has is quite as precise. (Which is pretty effing cool, if you ask me.)

But getting back to the main topic at hand, it's those kinds of things that get me all ~~turned on~~ jazzed up about learning foreign languages in the first place, because every once in a while they might introduce us to an entirely new aspect of reality (or at least they might make us *feel* like we're moving a bit farther down the asymptote towards true and *objective* reality), and this was *not* something I knew I'd be so ~~hot and bothered by~~ intrigued by until I finally experienced it for myself. Here's what I mean: do you know how some people are able to taste/smell that one particular chemical found in cilantro/coriander,

while other people literally cannot? (This is why some people *haaaaate* it, btw.) Well, imagine being someone who isn't able to detect that chemical, but then for some fucked up reason you started detecting it *after* you learned French. *That's* what I'm saying it can feel like sometimes, and that's probably the reason why I have such a renewed interest in semantics and linguistic relativity after all these years—because back when I was first learning about this stuff, it never really dawned on me *how* other languages could play a role, and it *certainly* never dawned on me that I'd end up learning to speak a few of them myself. The point is, I've just become really eager to write about and share what I've encountered throughout the process of learning another language, and that's because (A) not everyone gets to experience what it's like to be immersed in a foreign language as an adult, and (B) most of the people who *do* experience it probably don't keep a giant catalogue of all the smartypants quirks and observations they've come across like I do, lol. (*I mean, how else would I have had all of this material?*)

That said, I think it's time to go right back down that rabbithole.

First things first, I've only been quote-unquote "immersed" in Portuguese and German, so whatever I've learned from those experiences is obviously going to have some gaps that only other languages could fill. And just so we're clear on where I stand in terms of proficiencies, my Portuguese is self-proclaimed to be rock solid, and my German is widely-known to suck balls. In fact, I probably know way more *about* German than I ~~actually~~ currently speak it, but that's okay because small victories are still victories. For example, now that my German is finally coming along (but only to the point where it's impressive to someone who *doesn't* speak it), people on the street have finally started responding to me in German instead of just immediately switching to English—and that's a really big deal for Berlin, honestly. (I mean, how the heck am I supposed to get better at speaking German when I'm the only one speaking it? At least in Brazil there weren't as many locals who could speak English well enough to make the switch worthwhile.)

So anyway, now I'd like to loop all the way back around to the topic of how

sound doesn't have any inherent meaning. If you remember the part from earlier about how 'the word is not the thing,' well, now's the time to forget that shit because, in practice, when we're learning a new language (or even just speaking our own native one), we really don't have a choice but to make the heuristic leap of equating both sounds with words and words with things. For instance, when you hear a word, do you spend any time thinking about what that word *sounds* like (or *looks* like), or do you automatically skip ahead and go straight to meaning? Hell, at this point even our own individual names are just strings of otherwise meaningless sounds that make us turn our heads—that is, unless your name is something like Braxtynn or McKayleigh, because in that case your name *does* have meaning (*according to a meme I saw*), and that meaning is 'white as fuck,' lol.

But seriously though, isn't that the gist of how a language works in the first place? Like, somehow we know what the words mean without ever having to think about them (or even knowing *how* we know them), so that's why we have a tendency to blur the lines between language and reality: because we walk around with the foregone conclusion that sound and meaning are one in the same.

This becomes especially apparent when we encounter cognates in other languages, for example, because when we hear Italian words like *cuscino* and *pavimento* ('pillow' and 'floor') our brains go, "Oh yeah, because those are just like *cushion* and *pavement* in English." On the flipside, however, there are also false cognates (aka false friends), and those are when foreign words *look like* they mean things that they most certainly do not. Some good examples of this include how *Gift* means 'poison' instead of 'present' in German, how *eekhoorn* means 'squirrel' instead of 'acorn' in Dutch, and (my personal favorite) how *embarazada* means 'pregnant' instead of 'embarrassed' in Spanish. On the whole, false cognates like these are generally pretty easy to remember just because of how unusual they are, but that doesn't stop some of them from messing with our heads sometimes—especially when they mean the exact opposite of what they look like. Here's one that makes me feel like an idiot pretty much every time I come across it:

Do you know how most doors in public places will have those labels on them instructing you to push or pull? Well, in Brazil, all the 'pull' labels say the word *puxe* on them, and in Portuguese that's pronounced a lot like the word ~~'cheeseburger'~~ 'pushy' in English. See where this is going?

First off, as a comparison, let me backtrack for a second by saying that there's nothing particularly confusing about the words for push and pull in German (i.e., *drücken* and *ziehen*), so all it took was a few weeks for me to get the hang of those. Nevertheless, even after years of speaking Portuguese, I still have serious problems with doors that say *puxe* on them, because if I'm not paying special attention before I get to one, my brain short circuits and I can't even figure out what language I'm *thinking* in anymore. At that point, the only move I have left is to 'accidentally' grab the door handle with way too much force *just in case it starts to open* before I begin to pull it, because if it *does* start to swing open, then I try to act casual by continuing forward during that split-second. The problem with that is, it's never casual, it works way less than half the time, and I end up feeling ~~pregnant~~ embarrassed either way.

Childbearing dadjokes aside, I've even tried coming up with some donkeybridges to help me differentiate between the two labels, but none of them have ever worked because the label for push (*empurre*) is not even visible from the *puxe* side of the door anyway. (Does that make sense? Like, I'll still run into the same issue with *puxe* every time because it only ever appears in isolation. Also, did I mention that I almost never have this problem when I'm on the *empurre* side of the door?) In any case, the part about this that truly freaks me out (besides the fact that most doors to businesses are supposed to open outward according to fire code and yet I still can't get it down) is how the mere sight of the word *puxe* must somehow be forcing me to think of how the word sounds *before* I'm able to think of what the word means—and if *that's* the case, then that makes it seem like sound must be ontologically prior to meaning or some shit (as if 'sounding out' a word in our heads were somehow a necessary step between reading a word and comprehending its meaning.) So I don't know, I guess I just assumed that we could fly straight from Reading-town to Meaning

City without needing to make a stopover in Soundville.

Hmm.

Anyhow, in addition to false cognates, another thing that can mess with us is something that I like to call a phantom cognate (*which is not an official term*). This is when we momentarily convince ourselves that a foreign word is a cognate even when it totally isn't. Unfortunately I don't have any goofy anecdotes for this one (*so perhaps that's actually fortunate*), but a decent example would be like hearing the German verb *fragen* (which means 'to ask') and then thinking to yourself, "Oh yeah, that means 'to ask' because in English there's, *umm...*" and then you start to rattle off a bunch of synonyms in your head, like *question, inquire,* and *request* (or even '*percontate*') until you ultimately conclude that there was never any connection that you knew about in the first place. As a result, if and when you reach this point, there's really only two explanations for what happened: one, that this was just some weird-ass fluke (aka a phantom cognate), or two, that maybe your mind has finally decided that the sound of the word *fragen* simply means 'to ask' in your head in the exact same way that the word 'ask' does—and if this is the case, then that's essentially a sign that you've started to make the quantum leap between translating everything in your head, and literally thinking in the other language. (*All you need after that is to do the exact same thing with about ten thousand or so additional words, plus grammar and stuff, and you're golden.*)

[Update: I got clapped by English again. Apparently 'frain' is an obsolete word that used to mean 'to ask' before it fell out of use.]

In any event, once we start to quote-unquote "hear" meaning in another language like that, our fundamental reactions to the sounds of those words start to change, including how we *feel* about them. This is probably why people who don't speak German will often say that it sounds super harsh or ugly (or even angry) at times, whereas people who *do* speak German will hardly ever notice it (and they may

even say that it sounds pleasant to them). Similarly, I can still remember back when I thought Portuguese sounded like a drunken form of Spanish or something, but now that I speak it, I just can't hear it like that anymore, even when I try. In fact, once I became adequately fluent, somehow that caused Spanish to start sounding more and more cartoonish to me by comparison.[31] Either way, I guess what's weird for me personally is that any opinion I might have moving forward is going to be partial to the Carioca dialect of Portuguese that I learned in Brazil, and that's definitely *not* the same as the OG variety spoken in Portugal; I mean, it's still similar enough for me to understand most things (*and for all of my examples where I said 'Portuguese' instead of 'Brazilian Portuguese' to remain accurate, hopefully*), but a lot of it still ends up coming across all garbled and guttural-sounding to me as well. As a result, even though it's fairly clear to me that I prefer the sound of Brazilian Portuguese to most varieties of Spanish at this point, I suppose my familiarity biases lead me to prefer the sound of Spanish to that of European Portuguese. (Plus there's also the fact that the Brazilian Portuguese way of telling someone that you're experiencing cold-like symptoms is the European Portuguese way of telling someone that you're constipated... *I shit you not*).

Side note: all I'm really trying to say here is that despite how easy it is for us to be glove-snowball-throwers about the sounds of other languages, it's usually pretty difficult for us to critique those of our own because of how easily meaning can get in the way. Case in point: words with positive connotations are typically viewed more favorably than words with negative connotations (since most people would agree that *lovely* sounds more pleasant than *disgusting*, or that *pigeonhole* sounds more pleasant than *dovetail*).[32] Nevertheless, if you're at all curious about how English sounds to non-speakers, you are in luck, because in 1972 a man named Adriano Celentano wrote an entire song ~~comprised of~~ composed of fake English words he made up as a demonstration of how they sound to Italians. The song is called *Prisencolinensinainciusol*, it sounds sort of like Bob Dylan with a hint of Elvis or something, and seriously, it's a work of genius. (If there were ever a time to stop reading and look something up, this is it. Try to find the 40th anniversary video on YouTube.)

Meanwhile, from a more scientific perspective, we can also observe words for

their musicality via what's called phonaesthetics. This is a term that JRR Tolkien usually gets credited for coining, and it refers to the study of the beauty and/or pleasantness associated with certain words and sounds. (Also, in somewhat of another hindsight coincidence, words that sound pleasing are called euphonious in phonaesthetics, whereas words that sound displeasing are called cacophonous —*my old buddy!*) Altogether, I can't say that I understand much about phonaesthetics (since I'm not very musically gifted), but for whatever reason it's the case that words and/or terms with three-syllables and short vowels are typically regarded as the most pleasant. Some examples of this include *luminous*, *bungalow*, and the phrase *cellar door*, which has been lauded by the likes of both C.S. Lewis and Edgar Allan Poe, in addition to Tolkien himself. Furthermore, and this might be completely unrelated, but sometimes we pronounce certain words by dropping one of their syllables (e.g., *temper-ture, veg-tables, We'n-sday, med-eval, int-resting, vet-rinarian, cath-lic, fav-rite*), and although we probably do this for the sake of convenience and/or laziness, I wouldn't be surprised if there were a very tiny degree of euphony connected to it as well. (That is, except for the word *caramel*, since that's definitely pronounced like *care-a-mel*, and people who say it like *car-mull* with two syllables should be thrown in jail. Fight me.)

So if you haven't guessed by now, I'm obviously the kind of guy who keeps a running list of his favorite words, and I can only imagine that ~~loneliness~~ sound has everything to do with it; I mean, clearly I hate the word *rural* because of how difficult it is to pronounce, and I also think the word *buckle* can go meet up with 'as per usual' in hell because it's impossible to say softly without sounding like you're trying to be seductive or something. (It's kind of like the way it's impossible to say the word 'bubble' in an angry way because it always ends up sounding all cute and pouty.) But anyway, as far as my list of favorite words goes (which you're more than welcome to steal for yourself), I like saying *squawk, whimsical, smarmy, mendacious, clumsy, critter, slippage, skirmish, goggles, warped, insufferable* (as well as its Portuguese synonym *insuportável*), *flirtatious, haberdashery, alcove, squishy, refrigerator* (and also *frigorifero* in Italian, which is amazing), *crunchy, blubber,* and *hedgehog*. To round things off (because why the hell not), some other Portuguese words I like to say are *liquidificador, nervosa, cachaça, boquiaberto, paralelepípedo, abacaxi,* and *arrepiado*. As for German words, so far I'm fond of saying *Schmuck, schmutzig, schwanger, Zwiebeln, zusammen, unmöglich, Verkehr, Quatsch, fünfundfünfzig,*

Sehenswürdigkeiten, zurückzugeben, and *Vergangenbangen.* Finally, my go-to Spanish words are *desafortunadamente, caliente, tortuga, albóndigas, chuchería, cacahuate,* and *hablábamos*. (Thanks for indulging me on this. I hope it was as good for you as it was for me.)

Alright, moving on from the sounds of individual words, sometimes there are rhythms within our overall speech patterns that vary from language to language as well. For instance, in Brazil, the cadence for saying phone numbers is slightly different from how people say them in the States. (That is, Americans say their phone numbers in a three-three-four arrangement that goes, "*bum bum bum… bum bum bum… bam bam bam bam,*" whereas Brazilian phone numbers have one additional digit, so they use a three-four-four arrangement that instead goes, "*boom boom bah… boom boom bah boom… boom boom boom bah.*")[33] Of course, this is clearly a minor difference in the grand scheme of things, but that can still lead to some awkwardly stilted exchanges—such as *every time* I went to the pharmacy to load up on ~~drugs~~ mobile data for my ~~burner phone~~ local SIM card. It's also weird because I'm actually faster and/or better at reciting that particular phone number in Portuguese than I am in English (considering how I never have to say it in English, so I'd probably have to translate it in my head first), but I'm still completely locked into saying it with the rhythm that I've been using my whole life, and that trips people up like you would not believe. (Btw, if you want to give this a shot yourself, just pretend that there's a number nine in between the second and third digits of your own presumably ten-digit number, and then try to say the whole thing out loud without writing anything down. If you succeeded at this to the point where you found it to be pretty easy, my guess is that you either force-fit it into the rhythm that you're virtually incapable of *not* using, or you ended up using the Brazilian ~~bum-bum~~ boom-boom pattern without even realizing it.)

When it comes down to it, I suppose we don't pay very much attention to the way we emphasize certain parts of our speech (at least not overtly), but sometimes that can make all the difference. This is why sarcasm can be so difficult to pick up over text messages, and it's also why a sentence like, "I didn't *say* she kissed me," can have at least six different meanings depending on which of the six words you italicize. (E.g., from left to right: someone else said

it, I truly didn't say it, I merely implied it, someone else kissed me, she did something *other* than kiss me, and she kissed someone else.) On the flipside, emphasis is also responsible for how the infamous eight buffalo sentence (i.e., "Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo") can actually make sense *and* still be 100 percent grammatically correct.[34] In this case, however, there's really only one canonical meaning of the sentence, and it must be spoken with perfect emphasis for it to be at all comprehensible without the use of complementizers (aka helper words).

Furthermore, in addition to rhythm and emphasis, most languages also have rules about the *order* of sounds that many native speakers don't even realize they follow. In English, one of these rules is called ablaut reduplication, and that's when we repeat a word while also changing the first vowel in each of our subsequent repetitions, such as *splish-splash*, *hip-hop*, and *ting-tang* walla walla *bing-bang*. The somewhat unwritten (yet still written) rule here is that if you're going to repeat a word and change its vowel once, the order of those vowels must go from an *i* to either an *a* or an *o*. Meanwhile, if you're repeating the word two times (for a total of three), the order must start with an *i* and then go from an *a* to an *o*. There's a whole buttload of satisfying examples of this (e.g., *pitter-patter*, *criss-cross*, *tic-tac-toe*, and *bingo-bango-bongo*), however they'd all sound super weird if you messed around with the rules. I mean, imagine wearing *flap-flops* on your feet. Disgusting, right? Likewise, if a fairy godmother showed up in your kitchen saying shit like "*boppity-bappity boo*," you'd kick that crazy witch straight out.

Side note: despite adding my own personal touch to all of that, I only found out about this reduplication stuff because of a book passage that went viral for referencing yet another unwritten rule called adjectival precedence; this one deals with how there's a specific order to the way in which we create chains of consecutive adjectives (such as "a pair of brand-new brown leather boots," or "some spooky little ancient Chinese finger traps"). The order in question goes like this: quantity, opinion, size, age, shape, color, origin, material, purpose, and then the noun.[35] Of course, rarely do we ever come close to exhausting the full list (and sometimes there are exceptions because of conflicts with other rules), but that doesn't stop us from knowing exactly where everything goes when we

say things like, "a council of rich old white heterosexual men," or "that crazy-ass curly-headed Italian next-door neighbor of yours." Once again, though, if we ever mess around with the rules, things can start to get weird in a hurry. For instance, if that crazy Italian neighbor of yours told you to get lost or else he'd hit you with a *big fat hand-made wooden walking stick*, you'd probably be like, "Screw you, mister" (since everything he said was in the right order, albeit rude), however if he threatened to hit you with a *wooden hand-made fat walking big stick* instead, you'd probably be like, "Have a good weekend, Mr. Capelli… you crazy sanemagogna."

Anyhow, what makes adjectival precedence significant is hardly the fact that the order exists (since many languages follow a similar rule), it's the fact that we're all so damn good at obeying the order without even having to think about it. Fun fact: supposedly this is what originally inspired JRR Tolkien to pursue writing (*or almost give it up, I'm not really sure*) because one time when he ~~was seven years old~~ had seven years, he wrote a story about a 'green great dragon' that his mother made him change to a 'great green' one instead; later on, when he asked her why he couldn't keep it the way it was, she didn't have an answer for him.

I like that story because it shows just how challenging it can be to learn a new language—because not only do we have to learn a bunch of extracurricular details that the average native speaker can't even explain offhand, but we also have to learn how to compete with (and suppress) some of our own instincts that we never have to pay attention to as adults. Fortunately in this case, the order of adjectives tends to be fairly consistent from one language to the next, but you can imagine how tedious things can get when you have to memorize rules that aren't so ubiquitous.

In German, one of these rules has to do with the order of adpositional phrases (which I only know how to explain by making a comparison); in English, for example, it's not unusual to say something like, "I'm going to the office by bus tomorrow." Meanwhile, to say that exact same thing in German (*or Japanese, Mandarin, Afrikaans, or Dutch*), you're supposed to rearrange the information

so that it arrives in the order of time, manner, and then place (as in, "I'm going tomorrow by bus to the office.") Of course, saying the natural English order in German (or the German order in English) doesn't exactly change the meaning of the sentence per se, but it *does* mark you as a non-native speaker (in both languages) for going against a firm convention. Nevertheless, simple changes to word order *can* still affect meaning in other situations, like how most Romance languages will allow you to move certain adjectives around their nouns as a way of disambiguating a problem we have in English where saying something like, "That's my old car" can refer either to a new-ish car that you used to own in the past, or to an old-ish car that you still own today—but remember, if you *ever* try to say "That's my car old" in English like that, people would look at you like you're a goddamned Quaker or something.

Look, I don't know who I'm yelling at either, but all I'm trying to say is that word order is a really big deal in English, and since learning how to speak a new language relies heavily upon being able to manage our expectations of what's coming next *while we're still in the middle of listening,* any unexpected changes to word order can really up us fuck.

That's honestly one of the reasons why I think learning German in particular can be so challenging, because a handful of its grammatical features are head-final (meaning the most important pieces of information will often come last). For instance, since the only truly restricted part of a German sentence (in most regular cases) is the position of the verb in the main clause, most if not all other verbs and/or past participles may not show up until the end—and even when they do, they'll probably show up in reverse order relative to English. (So like, the English sentence, "You should have gone to the store earlier" could be rendered in German as, "You had earlier in the store go should.")[36] Thus, as a result, when you're a total newbie and you're trying to listen to people speak German, sometimes you can get so caught up trying to guess what action is taking place (which you won't find out until later anyway) that you end up spacing out and ignoring the final difference between something like "*Wir haben das Buch bereits gelesen*" ("We have already read the book") and "*Wir haben das Buch bereits verbrannt*" ("We have already burned the book"). Fun fact: there's also a similar method of separating verb phrases in German called the

Satzklmammer (which is sort of like a split-infinitive on steroids), and Mark Twain fucking *haaaaated* it.[37]

Moving on, another thing that's weird (from a foreigner's perspective) about German word order is the fact that most simple sentences will still end up following the same subject-verb-object formation as English—and that can be misleading for new learners because it's more of an exception to the rule than the rule itself. In fact, on the literal first page of instruction in my German textbook for beginner-level English (which I got because I think it helps to see things from the other direction sometimes), it starts out by saying, "*Wichtig: Im Englischen steht das Subjekt in einem bejahten Aussagesatz immer vor dem Verb.*" ("Important: In English, the subject always precedes the verb in an affirmative statement.") I mean, just think about that for a minute; if the very *first* thing they teach you about English is *not* to fuck around with that rule, then that must mean you can fuck around with it in German all you want, right?

So why is that? Well, it's mostly because German grammar also has a buttload of something called declension, and that's when you change the inflection of a word (usually by giving it a different ending) in order to signify its role in the sentence. This is essentially the same thing as verb conjugation, only for other parts of speech. Thus, unlike sequence-dependant languages (e.g, English, French, and Spanish) which rely on things like word order, adpositions, and noun-verb agreement to mark the subjects, objects, and possessors of a given sentence, German accomplishes this via the declension of its articles, pronouns, adjectives, and even its nouns. As a result, word order is not even a fixed thing in German, and that's because you can just shuffle declensions around without changing the overall meaning of a sentence. For instance, despite how a sentence like, "The dog bites the man" means something very different from "The man bites the dog" in English, both "*Der Hund beißt den Mann*" and "*Den Mann beißt der Hund*" mean "The dog bites the man" in German. See how that works?

Side note: as far as I can tell, the only real reason why you would ever invert a sentence like that is to add emphasis, similar to how English speakers can

sometimes get away with breaking the subject-verb-object rule via what's known as an anastrophe (e.g., "No thanks, I don't like apples. *Oranges I like.*") As for the dog example, when faced with the option of biting a man or a newspaper (or whatever else), the emphasis is that it's *the man* the dog chooses to bite. Also, for whatever reason, this reminds me of a children's fable called the *Little Red Hen,* because when she goes around asking her animal friends, "Who will help me [accomplish my tasks]," all she hears back is a bunch of identical responses like, "'*Not I,*' said the cat." So I guess what I'm trying to say is that if you apply that exact same spoken cadence to "*The man,* bites the dog," it starts to make a lot more sense. I suppose it's just tough to write it in such a way that it would sound like that to readers on the first pass—kinda like that buffalo-buffalo sentence from earlier. Also, speaking of which, it just so happens that German has a similarly well-known sentence that goes, "*Wenn Fliegen hinter Fliegen fliegen, fliegen Fliegen Fliegen nach*" ("When flies fly behind flies, flies fly after flies").

Anyway, the point here is not to suggest that German speakers can tEChNicaLLy go around speaking like Yoda whenever they want (*because that would still sound just as weird as doing so in English*); instead, what's remarkable is how this relatively small grammatical difference has been shown to have an enormous ripple effect on the way our brains literally process sentences. In developing children, for example, most two-year-olds around the world will have already figured out that word order is a fairly decent cue for identifying the subject of a given sentence (since the first noun is usually a good bet). Meanwhile, because word order is by far the most valid cue for interpreting *English* sentences (to the point where it's almost categorical), two-year olds learning English in particular will already differ from most other children by an order of magnitude when it comes to how strongly they rely upon word order as a cue. (And as a result, they'll even start to match adult-level English sentence processing behaviors as early as three years old.) In comparison, although children learning German will also develop a preference for word order that's nearly as strong by the age of four (meaning they ultimately rely on it *more* than German-speaking adults do), over time they start to recognize that word order is not always a valid cue for them, so as they get older they learn to look for help from other cues such as animacy (aka signs of life) and noun-verb agreement instead.

To illustrate how this plays out in practice, researchers will often make use of sentences like, "The pencil is kicking the cow" as a way to observe and compare different interpretation strategies when multiple cues are in conflict. For English speakers, since they value word order above anything and everything else, this means that *whatever* you put in the position of the first noun (in this case a pencil) is what they'll assume to be performing the action of the sentence (kinda like how Ron Burgundy will read *anything* you put on the teleprompter). In German, however, since animacy cues ultimately carry more weight than word order, developing German speakers are far more inclined to perceive the cow as the agent, seeing as cows are capable of kicking and inanimate pencils are not. Furthermore (and just to make this an even spicier meatball), since the Italian ~~sausage~~ language prioritizes both animacy over word order *and* agreement over animacy, this means that Italian speakers (by around five or six years old) are likely to choose the pencil as the agent *at first*, however if the original sentence were changed to, "The pencil are kicking the cows," they'd probably choose the cows.

Of course, one big fat truth that I've still yet to mention here is the fact that animacy and agreement cues are (once again) only able to provide a stopgap solution for children learning German. This is because the most reliable and/or valid cue for interpreting German sentences is ultimately its case markings (aka the products of declension). Unfortunately, however, that shit's super complicated, and it's also way too advanced for children (*and me*) to understand right away. I mean, with four different cases (i.e., nominative, accusative, dative, and genitive) and four different declensions (depending whether something is masculine, feminine, genderless, or plural), that means there's at least *maths* many ways of picking the wrong ending at any given time. Thankfully, there *is* a generous amount of syncretism (aka grammatical overlap) among the German options, but when you literally have *six* different forms of the word 'the' (for example), that doesn't exactly leave you in a great spot if you can't remember and have to guess—*which is what I have to do all day long because my brain apparently refuses to memorize case markings out of protest*. At any rate, since most of the declensions are effectively too advanced and/or unreliable during the early stages of language acquisition, children learning German may not begin to incorporate case markings into their interpretation strategies until the age of

seven (according to some studies I read), and they may not match the sentence processing behaviors of their adult counterparts until the start of adolescence (according to others).

Side note: in case it sounds like I'm insinuating something stupid again, none of this is an indication of higher or lower intelligence levels or anything like that. The fact is, it just so happens that the most reliable cue for English also happens to be the most available cue from the very beginning. As a result, children learning English simply don't have to make as many adjustments to their interpretation strategies *(let alone shift from a syntactic strategy to a morphological one)*, so that's why they reach their ceilings as early as they do. (It's also why they're usually a bit late to pick up on the rest of the cues they ignore as a result, so it all evens out in the end.) Meanwhile, none of this really matters anyway, because regardless of grammatical (and even cultural) differences, most languages will still end up communicating information at a fairly uniform rate due to our brain's limited ability to create and process speech as adults. This is generally understood to be the reason why there's a negative correlation between syllabic rate and information density across virtually all natural languages—because when a language becomes more informationally dense, people have to speak it slower. In other words, Spanish and Japanese are two of the fastest spoken languages because there's just not a lot of information packed into each one of their average syllables, and on the flipside, German and Mandarin are among the slowest, since Mandarin is a dense tonal language, and because German wants me to die a slow and painful death.

Speaking of which, one final juicy takeaway regarding the development of cue strengths is the fact that the aforementioned shift in strategy (from word order to animacy to case markings) is *not* something that merely happens with children learning German as a first language; that's because it *also* happens with adults learning German as a second language—and if it already takes up to a decade for *native children* to match adult-level processing, well, then you can only imagine how long it must take for a non-native manchild like me to get there. (Just kidding, I'm way smarter than some dumbass kids. They're just not as ~~fragile~~ afraid of messing up as I am.) Furthermore, the speed at which an individual adult's shift takes place can also vary according to the adult's own native

language-specific cue strengths. This is obviously more bad news for English speakers, since the only case markings that they're familiar with are restricted to subject pronouns (such as *I, we* and *they*), object pronouns (such as *me, us,* and *them*), and personal pronouns (such as *mine, ours,* and *theirs*). In fact, had word order *not* been the only cue to make any significant contributions to English processing, those case inflections would have actually been second in line (ahead of agreement and animacy) in terms of cue reliability.

On a related note, I suppose this could also be a contributing factor as to why some multilingual people will often say that learning their third language was 'surprisingly easier' than learning their second (assuming their second was not acquired during childhood), because it's very likely that they had already broken the seal in terms of making an adjustment to non-native cues (*especially* if their third language was a member of the same language family as their second). Of course, in my own personal progression, since Portuguese has a grand total of zero case markings, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that learning Portuguese was not a great stepping stone for adjusting to German. (By comparison, I think a much better primer would've been to learn something like Turkish, Russian, Romanian, or Greek instead, seeing as those have anywhere from four to seven grammatical cases each.) Nevertheless, at this point I can at least assume that I've successfully learned how to process for noun-verb agreement, since that's such a strong cue in Portuguese that you can regularly omit subject pronouns at the start of certain sentences—such as all three of those 'teensy little lie' phrases that I mentioned earlier (i.e., "[*Eu*] *já volto,*" [*Nós*] *vamos marcar,*" and "[*Eu*] *estou chegando*"). Oddly enough, this feature of dropping pronouns is actually a pretty common one among Romance languages (except for French), and it's also found in a mixed bag of non-Romance languages that are quote-unquote "null-subject" as well. When it comes to English, however, you can't really drop pronouns like that (except in certain colloquial 'ellipses' such as "Sounds good," "Will do," and "Shit's impressive") because there's just way too much syncretism across English verb conjugations for agreement to be a reliable cue. (Case in point: I *won*, you *won*, we *won*, they *won*, and he/she/it *won*.) Similarly, although German conjugations are far more complex than those of English, there are still a few trouble areas in German grammar that cause agreement to be far more useful ~~in concordance~~ in coalition with other cues rather than on its own.

And if I can get back to going out on limbs here, I'd like to continue by claiming that not only did Portuguese *not* prepare me very well for the adjustment to German sentence processing, but it also kind of worked against me in other areas as well, namely the genderization of nouns. Like, do you know how long it took for me to memorize the gender of every frickin' noun in Portuguese just to find out that I'd have to do it all over again in German? (Also, this isn't the same as how we arbitrarily assign genders to inanimate objects like ships, cars, and other sentimental items in English; this is about how literally every single noun, *from a ceiling fan to a nightmare,* has its own fixed grammatical gender.) And shit, at least the gender discrepancies between Portuguese and Spanish were few and far between (like how 'milk' and 'problems' are feminine in Spanish but masculine in Portuguese), however with German they end up being different from Portuguese a truly sinister amount of time. (*So I guess words are just like people these days; you can't assume their gender.*)[38]

Seriously though, I honestly wish there were an easy way to find out what percentage of nouns belong to the same genders in both German and Portuguese, but I can't even figure out how to type that query into Google without returning answers to different questions. Still, at the very least, we *do* know that 20 percent of them can already be thrown out as a bare minimum, since that's roughly the share of German words that belong to its third, genderless gender (also known as the 'neuter'). Fun fact: this particular grammatical feature only exists in about ten or so languages of ten million or more speakers, and among that group, only German and Dutch had the bright idea of assigning three different genders to knives, forks, and spoons. (*Meanwhile everyone else seemed to understand that this was obviously way too much cutlery fucklery*).[39] And by the way, I'm not even going to reveal to you which utensil belongs to which gender in German until a bit later on, because otherwise I'd just be handing you the answers for you to turn around (without even making a guess) and go, "Yeah, that's what I thought," you sneaky little *Hosenscheißer* ('pants-shitter').

So anyhow, when you're coming from a language that doesn't really utilize gendered words (apart from a handful of foreignisms like *blond, brunet, blonde,*

brunette, and the whole gang of *alumnus, alumna, alumni,* and *alumnae*), the idea of grammatical gender is pretty unusual. And although English *does* make some gender-related distinctions for certain titles, occupations, and animals (e.g., prince/princess, actor/actress, and hen/rooster), those are almost always treated as completely separate nouns—*because, like, you can still only ever get the milk from a cow and the horns by the bull*. Also, the somewhat recent trend of actresses referring to themselves as 'actors' was always way more about the inherent gender bias of the language and/or culture rather than a direct argument for or against grammatical gender, too, wasn't it? (That said, I suppose they're a lot more connected than we otherwise might've thought.)

There's all sorts of confusey gendered stuff in other languages that can make you scratch your head as well. In Italian, for example, Giraffes are always feminine, so you have to refer to a male giraffe by putting the word *maschio* ('male') behind the noun while also keeping the feminine article in front of it (e.g., *la giraffa maschio*). Similarly, the reverse is true for hippos, because those are always masculine. Of course, there are also words like *eco* ('echo') which are feminine in the singular but masculine in the plural, and the reverse is true for *uovo* ('egg') and *uova* ('eggs'). Furthermore, some Italian words are always one gender in the singular, but can either be masculine or feminine in the plural (depending on what it means); this actually isn't so bad when the noun itself stands for two clearly distinct objects, like how the word 'horn' is both a musical instrument *and* an animal part (*which I suppose is the same thing from a historical standpoint*), but sometimes both plural versions will refer to the same noun in two slightly different ways, like how the word for 'finger' is masculine when you're talking about just one of your fingers, femine when you're talking about all of them, but then masculine again if you're talking about a few fingers in particular. *Ain't that some shit?* And from what I understand, these sorts of things are supposedly the byproducts of whenever OG Latin had split off into Vulgar Latin and abandoned its neutral third gender; unfortunately, that still doesn't explain why a 'child' in Portuguese is always feminine, nor does it explain why a female child in German (*das Mädchen*) is always genderless until she becomes a woman (*die Frau*). And here you thought '*tomara-que-caias*' were ~~sexy~~ sexist…[40]

But back to what it's like when you're first starting to learn German, because with all of these intricate rules about word order, gender, declensions, and conjugations, it really does seem like there are endless ways of screwing up sometimes. As a result, just making an attempt to speak can be very taxing as a beginner because it often feels like you need to know the full extent of whatever you're about to say before you ever open your mouth. Granted, that's typically how things are supposed to work, but with English, as long as you try to stay one or two words ahead—*and avoid ending sentences with awkward prepositions, even though that's still okay most of the time*—you can usually get away with the Michael Scott method of speaking: "Sometimes I'll start a sentence and I don't even know where it's going, I just hope I find it along the way, like an improv conversation." In German, however, unless you already have the ending in mind (*or if you're actually a decent speaker of German*), I'm just not so sure that you can do that as often without accidentally talking your way into a trap or something (due to a clause that needed to be at the front, for example, or a verb that needed to be at the end). Of course, I'm clearly not an expert on this, so I went ahead and asked a few of my German friends what they thought about it. And despite how several of them started out by saying that they *didn't* think about it (*ba-dum-tsss*), the overall consensus I got from them was that it was probably a little bit accurate on some level—w*hich I'll take as a maybe.*

And while I'm already making hasty assumptions about things that I don't know enough about, I'll also venture a guess to say that this characteristic of the language (i.e., having to be so damn precise all the time) probably has a lot to do with the way that German people are often stereotyped for not having a good sense of humor. I mean, a lot of our humor comes from when situations have multiple meanings, so if it's very difficult *not* to be specific in German, then how could you ever say one thing and mean your mother? Again, there's literally *five* different versions of the German word for 'new' (which of course, all depend on the gender of the noun it modifies, the role of the noun in the sentence, and whether the noun is singular or plural), and there's also *seven* different grammatical forms of the word 'you.'[41]

But don't get me wrong, because Germans are still very capable of being very funny, and any suggestion otherwise would be very unfair. At the same time, it's

also true that jokes don't always translate very well into other languages, and this usually has way more to do with how the language itself is constructed rather than any individual speaker's sense of humor. (In other words, due to the ridiculously flexible makeup of the English language, many of its speakers are led to believe that they're inherently funnier people, when in reality it's simply their language that provides them with an abundance of potentially confusing and/or comedic opportunities.) The fact is, not only does German humor exist, but it's also nowhere near as dry as people often make it out to be; you just can't rely on the same lazy setups that allow many other languages to thrive on confusion.

Here's an example of what I mean: in English, the word 'fly' is both a verb and a noun, and the same can be said of the German word *Fliegen* (however in this case it's the plural form of the noun that doubles as the verb, but that's not really going to matter here). As such, the English sentence "We saw her fly" can either mean that we saw a woman soar through the air, or that we merely saw an insect that belongs to the woman. In German, however, since you're required to make a distinction between the objective and possessive cases regarding the word 'her,' you simply cannot recreate the same double meaning. In other words, you have to choose between saying "*Wir sahen sie fliegen*" ('We saw her fly') and "*Wir sahen ihre Fliegen*" ('We saw her flies') no matter what. Of course, the fact that all German nouns are capitalized in writing is also a dead giveaway, but the case distinction is still clear and obvious in speech either way. (*And by the way, this wasn't supposed to be a funny joke or anything, it was just an example.*)

Similarly, German's ample supply of lengthy compound words can easily curb the potential for mimicking ambiguous English constructions as well. For example, the double meaning that exists between "We saw her house fly" and "We saw her housefly" is also swatted away by German because *Haus* ('house') is a masculine word, and *Hausfliegen*/*Stubenfliegen* ('houseflies') is a feminine one. Thus, since the feminine object calls for the same declension as the plural in this example (which is why it didn't matter if it were 'fly' or 'flies'), this time it's the gender and/or plurality of the compound noun that leads us to the inevitable distinction between "*Wir sahen ihr Haus fliegen*" ('We saw her house fly') and "*Wir sahen ihre Hausfliegen*" ('We saw her houseflies').

Nevertheless, with great exactness comes great *Eindeutigkeit* ('unambiguity'), and the tradeoff here is that although German's strict, deliberate, and even draconian grammar ends up being less-than-ideal for translating humor, its ability to curtail ambiguity is precisely the reason why German has been so useful in philosophical texts throughout history. That said, several of my all-time favorite language concepts have a lot to do with ambiguity anyway (not to mention how some people believe that the preservation of ambiguity is essential for humanity's survival against a potential uprising of super intelligent ~~Germans~~ robots),[42] and here's a brief rundown of the some of those:

A *garden-path sentence* is a grammatically correct statement that most readers are likely to parse incorrectly on the first pass. The reason for this is because the most natural interpretation of the sentence is not the correct one by the time the reader reaches the end, and this causes a clunk in the parsing process where suddenly the entire sentence appears to be ungrammatical until further inspection. "The government plans to raise taxes were defeated" is one example. "The daughter of the queen's son admires himself" is another. There's also, "The cotton clothing is usually made of grows in warm climates," and "We painted the wall with cracks." You get the idea.

Similarly (and sometimes lumped together as being the same thing), a *paraprosdokian* is an intentionally misleading statement that causes unsuspecting listeners to have to reinterpret an earlier part of the sentence—only this time it's because the sentence seems nonsensical as opposed to ungrammatical. Comedian Groucho Marx was particularly famous for these (so much so that he's often credited for paraprosdokians that weren't even his, such as "I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn't it), and his most recognizable one was probably this: "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas; how he got in my pajamas, I don't know." Stand-up comic Mitch Hedberg was also known for lines like, "I haven't slept for ten days, because that would be too long," and some other unattributed examples include "War does not determine who is right, only who is left," and "On the other hand, you have different fingers."

An *antanaclasis* is a statement that repeats a word and/or phrase with a different meaning the second time, like when Vince Lombardi said, "Unless you're fired with enthusiasm, you'll be fired with enthusiasm." This clever little technique is often found in ad campaigns and slogans (similar to but *not* including "Don't get mad, get Glad"), and there's also a decent amount of other sayings that you may have heard before, such as "Time isn't wasted when you're wasted," and "Time flies like an arrow, fruit flies like a banana" (which is also a paraprosdokian, I guess).

This is a fun one: a *zeugma* is when one part of a sentence governs two other parts simultaneously, such as in "One child plays with dolls, the other trains," or "He does his work, and I mine." Now, without additional context, constructions like these can be inherently ambiguous (because that other child might be training for some kind of competition rather than playing with trains, and I might be mining for minerals instead of doing my work), but zeugmas can also be used in creative, unambiguous utterances, like "I took charge and my vitamins," and "He changed his mind and his clothes." One particularly famous example is the line, "You held your breath and the door for me" from an Alanis Morissette song. Fun fact: Morissette was somewhat well-known for showcasing her linguistic prowess in her music, including how her biggest hit was a song called "Ironic" despite the fact that the lyrics were full of unfortunate coincidences and/or circumstances (e.g., rain on your wedding day) rather than true ironies, which she publicly stated was the most ironic part about the song.

Either coincidentally or ironically, there seems to be a lot of confusion (and perhaps ambiguity) on the internet regarding the difference between a zeugma and something else called a *syllepsis*; apparently they're interchangeable nowadays, but for the sake of sticklery, a syllepsis is a subcategory of zeugmas in which a word governs two or more other parts of a sentence simultaneously and must also be interpreted differently with respect to each of those other parts. One of the most commonly cited examples of this is a line from *Star Trek* that goes, "You are free to execute your laws and your citizens as you see fit," however here's another one that I've just made up: "The writer depressed the

buttons on his keyboard and his readers." (He's trying his best though, and that's what counts.)

Donkey sentences are sentences that cannot (easily) be translated into first-order predicate logic due to an irregularly numbered 'donkey' pronoun which causes the true meaning of the sentence to be grammatically incalculable from the way it's written. (So it's basically saying that the meaning of the sentence is not really equal to the sum of its individual parts/words.) The OG donkey sentence is this: "Every farmer who owns a donkey beats it."[43]

Now, ignoring the fact that 'beats it' can also mean 'leaves' (among other things), what's problematic about this sentence is that, despite how it's perfectly comprehensible to the average person, its use of the pronoun 'it' unfairly assumes one of two things: (A) that no farmer owns more than one donkey (which we know to be bullshit), or (B) that every farmer who owns a donkey beats every single donkey that he owns (which would've called for the pronoun 'them' in place of 'it'). So, the question is, what does the pronoun 'it' really stand for here—and if it stands for "one of the donkeys that every farmer who owns a donkey owns," then where the hell do human speakers pick that up from the original sentence, and why is it so hard to train computer programs to interpret it that way, too?

Here's another one: "If a man owns a garage with a window, he usually closes it when he leaves town."

Again, the problem with this one doesn't even have to do with the initial ambiguity between closing the garage or closing the window, it's about how the donkey pronoun 'it' is somehow semantically numberless, because our strongest natural interpretation of the sentence is that the man will close *all* of the windows in his garage (assuming it has at least one), and this leaves us with the question of how 'it' can stand for both 'the one window in his garage' and 'all of the windows in his garage' at the same time.

Here's just one more with a different pronoun just to spice things up: "Diane showed every girl her picture."

Without any additional context, does the pronoun 'her' lead you to believe that (A) Diane showed every girl a picture of Diane, (B) Diane showed every individual girl a picture of their respective selves, (C) Diane showed every girl the same exact picture of one girl in particular, or (D) Diane showed every girl a picture that is merely owned by one girl in particular? In any event, as long as there's *some* extralinguistic context, most natural language speaking humans can figure out the answer to these kinds of questions with virtually no additional effort.

Let's move on.

On a related note (but still moving on), we also have very little trouble recognizing and interpreting *headlinese*, aka the abbreviated style of writing newspaper headlines that was originally created to save print space. Of course, the drawback of abandoning certain syntactic conventions (such as omitting the copula) is that it often leads to ambiguous and/or absurd headlines like, "Juvenile Court Tries Shooting Defendant," and "Enraged Cow Injures Farmer With Pencil." These are known as *crash blossoms*, which is a term that was inspired by the following headline about a successful violin player whose father died in a 1985 Japan Airlines plane crash: "Violinist Linked to JAL Crash Blossoms." A few years later, the Columbia Journalism Review published a pair of anthologies named for two particularly good crash blossoms: "Squad Helps Dog Bite Victim," and "Red Tape Holds Up New Bridge." More recently, the Associated Press ran a near-literal crash blossom when it published a story in 2014 under the headline, "Dutch military plane carrying bodies from Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 crash lands in Eindhoven."

Alright, so having said all of that, you can probably see why researchers like to use these kinds of things to study language parsing strategies. I mean, even when you already know that something ambiguous is coming, it's still tough to avoid getting tricked by a false premise, isn't it? Here, try not to get bamboozled by this joke from Anthony Jeselnik: "My dad was a hard-ass. One of those guys who believed that men just learn by doing things, you know? You don't take classes. You don't read the instructions. You just do it and figure it out. Like, when I was a kid, I never got to take swimming lessons. No, my dad would pick me up and throw me in the water to teach himself CPR."

Speaking of dads, I imagine my own father would be even more disappointed in me if I came all this way and failed to mention *Yogi-isms*, which were the wordplay somersaults of the late baseball legend, Lawrence "Yogi" Berra. These are sort of like oxymorons in sentence form, such as "The future ain't what it used to be," and, "It's deja vu all over again," and, "Nobody goes there anymore, it's too crowded." Honestly, the list goes on and on, but I think the one that's the most relevant to English's problems with ambiguity is this: "We made too many wrong mistakes."

By the way, I'm not saying that you can't do any of these things in other languages, it's just that English (with its minimal declensions, maximal syncretism, minimal case markings, and maximal polysemy) is particularly well-built for them. In German, for example, you can still make garden-path sentences (also known by the term *Holzweg Effekt*); all you have to do is start with a noun that has the same exact declensions in the nominative and accusative cases for your direct object, *then* pick another noun that has different declensions in the nominative and accusative cases for your subject (because that way there'll only be one possible interpretation by the end), and *then* all you have to do is make sure that both the number and the person of your objects are the same (*or that there's syncretism among their conjugations*) so that the noun-verb agreement doesn't give it away and/or call for a pronoun that would alter the reader's most natural interpretation, *and that's it!*

Seriously though, despite how humor will often get lost in translation, wordplay and language jokes are still extremely popular in German. In fact, due to all of its big compound words, there's generally more opportunities for making German-only puns because of all of those extra levels (as opposed to how the majority of English compounds will only have two parts to them, like 'fire+cracker' or 'candle+stick'). Again, I'm not quite proficient enough to be ~~pinning tails on the donkey~~ pulling puns out of my ass in German just yet, but I *am* actively working on it because I think being able to make original wordplay jokes is one of the three telltale signs that you've finally succeeded in learning another language.[44]

Unfortunately, however, when beginners who are clearly beginners try to get cute with foreign wordplay, it's typically so unexpected and/or uncharacteristic of them (at least in the foreign language) that native speakers will often mistake their attempts at making a joke as a lack of understanding instead. This is because it's just a natural heuristic judgment of native speakers to assume that someone who struggles with their language is just not very bright, plainly and simply. (*Why else would we repeat the exact same words louder and louder to people who don't know what they mean in the first place anyway?*) Of course, there's always the possibility that the jokes themselves just weren't very punny, but when you're a third-party observer and you happen to understand the attempted joke right away, you can immediately tell when it's a misunderstanding on the native speaker's part, because they'll sometimes go out of their way to be helpful and correct the other person. For example, if you decided to make a stupid pun about how wearing socks and sandals is fashionably scandalous by calling them '*Skandalen*' (i.e., a mixture of *Sandalen* and *skandalös*) imagine if a native speaker responded with "Sorry, I think you mean *Sandalen.*" It's like, I know what I *meant* to mean.[45]

Side note: in case you were wondering, no, that was not one of my own anecdotal attempts at a German pun, I merely found it on the internet. (Mine are usually much ~~wurst~~ worse. *See what I mean?*) Nevertheless, one thing I remember from learning Portuguese is that for months I was trying to invent a portmanteau out of the words *açaí* (a popular frozen treat made from açaí berries and guaraná-flavored soda) and *saideira* (a slang term that means 'one more for

the road' in the contexts of drinks at a bar or something), but after roughly a dozen tries I finally gave up on it because *açaídeira* never got a good response from a native speaker (which I suspect is because the sound of it simply didn't line up well enough for it to make immediate sense—*or because people were simply unwilling to admit how god-damn genius that truly was*).

On the flipside, it kinda makes sense to me why all of this confusion would take place, because in the opposite direction, the words that I would always have the most trouble understanding in the middle of a conversation with a native speaker were always English brand names that had been naturalized into Portuguese (because it's super unusual to hear something like Red Bull being pronounced as 'hedgie bool,' for instance). In any case, I've ultimately come to the conclusion that until you've truly mastered all of the basics of a language (to the point where people won't even silently question your understanding to themselves anymore), you're probably better off saving your foreign wordplays for people who learned the same order of languages that you did, or for people who are already familiar with your proficiency levels in each one. That way you can get the best of both worlds *and* speak in calques with them whenever you want, like how my friend from the *arrastão* story from earlier absolutely loves to say "*isso chupa*" (a literal translation of "that sucks") in Portuguese. Now, obviously she would only ever say that to people with whom she has an existing bilingual rapport, and the same goes for me in the other direction, since I would only ever say "suck that mango" (the Portuguese equivalent of "how bout them apples") to people I know would understand it.

Interestingly enough, this kind of thing is actually quite popular on several not-so-serious parts of the German-speaking internet, because in many German forums and subreddits, for example, you'll find a lot of intentionally mistranslated English words and phrases from commenters who like to translate everything word-for-word whenever the result ends up being something stupid or silly. The unofficial name for this is '*Zangendeutsch*' (literally 'pliers German,' which is a play on *Zwangsdeutsch*, which refers to forced and/or obligatory translations into German), and although it can be pretty funny sometimes, I personally try to stay away from it because of how confusing/counterproductive it can be when you're still trying to learn, and

nobody talks like that in real life anyway (again, unless they know that the other person will get it).

But back to trying to be original in a foreign language, because once you've mastered all of the basics and can engage in full-blown conversations, there's still going to be a very lengthy intermediate phase where a lot of things remain unavailable to you in terms of how you can express yourself (be it for a lack of advanced vocabulary, or an incomplete knowledge of idioms, or whatever else). As a result, *not* being able to say what you otherwise might have said often forces you to change how you ultimately respond in certain situations. For instance, although I have an overwhelming urge to be facetious most of the time in English (which is sort of a dick thing to be doing in every conversation), I simply don't have the proficiency to be able to satisfy that impulse in German just yet, so that forces me to be a lot more sincere overall—*and people seem to like that, apparently. Who knew?*

Honestly, that's one of the reasons why I believe that people have different personalities in different languages (and that they may even prefer one of them over another, as I probably do with my personality in Portuguese over English). Of course, I still think the person on the inside remains mostly the same no matter what, but when we're limited in how we can express ourselves on the outside (while still being proficient enough to get through every conversation), that gives us an opportunity to renew and/or change how we ultimately do so, if we so desire. (Plus it's much easier to establish new habits in a completely new language than it is to change existing habits from an old one, at least in my experience.) It's like, imagine your personality were one of those six-button FM radios from ~~an old car~~ a car old; most of the time you'd drive around listening to your favorite station, but depending on your mood (*or if there were a commercial break*), you'd often cycle through the rest of your presets until you found something else to listen to. My point is, when you're developing your conversation skills in another language, you basically have the opportunity to choose an entirely new set of presets, including your primary station. Granted, the idea that a person would go so far as to make a conscious, concerted effort to engineer a completely new personality is where this starts to lose plausibility.

Nevertheless, I *do* think that the structure, grammar, and limitations of a given language will affect how a person's presets ultimately turn out no matter what (mostly due to how all of that linguistic relativity stuff constricts each language to an ever-so-slightly nuanced way of thinking and therefore way of speaking —*or is it the other way around?*) And sure, maybe the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V had his tongue in his cheek when he said the following line, but considering how he was once the King of Germany, the King of Italy, the King of Spain, the Archduke of Austria, and the Lord of the Netherlands, I don't even care if he was kidding around when he said, "I speak Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men, and German to my horse." (What a fucking baller, amirite?)

When it comes down to it, the notion that people are different in other languages isn't even anything new, however when it comes to proving it, the only things that we can easily test are their actions and their decisions. Did you know that morality is different in other languages? (What I mean is that, apart from our worldviews and personalities, sometimes there's a measurable difference in our decision-making when moral dilemmas are presented to us in a foreign language.) In 2014, researchers from a few universities in Barcelona teamed up with psychologists at the University of Chicago to conduct a study about this, and what they found was that people were significantly more likely to make utilitarian-based decisions in their non-native languages than they were in their native ones. (So like, imagine one of those hypothetical trolley problems where there's a runaway train that's about to kill five people and the only way to stop it is for you to push an equally innocent man standing in front of you onto the tracks; given the dilemma of *personally* having to murk a guy in order to save the others, only one in five respondents said they would push him after being presented with the problem in their native language, whereas one in three respondents said they would do so after receiving it in a foreign one.) There were all sorts of interesting nooks and crannies to that study (including how the results skewed in that direction for every single language pair involved, such as Korean to English, English to Spanish, and Spanish to Hebrew), however the part that stood out to me the most was how the non-native speakers whose answers most closely resembled the snap judgments of native speakers were also the ones with the highest proficiency in their foreign language—so at some point

the effect seems to have diminishing returns.

Naturally, one fairly low-hanging skepticism to these results is the idea that maybe some of the respondents did not fully understand the task in the foreign language, however this was unlikely for a few reasons: one, because the study participants who failed a comprehension test beforehand were excluded from the results altogether (as were those who grew up with the foreign language), and two, because a large subgroup of the participants had also received a logical reasoning test afterwards (with objective right and wrong answers this time), and those using a foreign language ultimately outperformed their native speaking counterparts by 13 percent. Furthermore, the researchers also went on to conduct an additional test with an alternative dilemma (in which you would blindly pull a switch to sacrifice the man rather than pushing him directly), and although the participants who received the original problem gave answers that were just as discrepant as they were in the first study (if not more so), roughly 80 percent of all native and non-native speakers alike opted for the utilitarian choice when faced with this new dilemma.[46] Thus, given the fact that the discrepancy only showed up when there was a greater chance for emotional reactivity, the researchers concluded that the results were not due to a lack of comprehension but rather the emotional and/or psychological distance provided by the foreign language—an effect that previous studies had observed in economic decision-making as well.

So does this mean that bilingual people make better and/or more utilitarian decisions overall? I don't know. Probably not. I'm also not even sure if becoming bilingual has any effect on a person's baseline decision-making in their native language (unless every time they were faced with a big decision they went, "Quick, ask me that again in French" or something). I think you'd also need to know what their individual decisions would have been had they never learned a second language, which is not easy. In any case, what we *do* know is that the brain is at least a little bit different after becoming bilingual, because studies comparing monolinguals, bilinguals, and trilinguals have found that both of the multilingual groups can be expected to outperform monolinguals during executive function tasks (such as controlling inhibitions, using the working memory, and switching from one task to another), with no apparent difference

between bilinguals and trilinguals. This is a pretty substantial benefit, since executive function is typically a major predictor of academic success, and academic success is typically a major predictor of long-term health and well-being. That said, *another* change that's been observed in bilingual people is that they typically demonstrate worse and/or slower lexical retrieval times than their monolingual counterparts (meaning bilinguals usually take longer on things like picture naming and other verbal fluency tasks). This is generally regarded as one of the main paradoxes of research on bilingualism, since becoming experienced in a second language will usually enhance performance on nonverbal cognitive tasks, however this seems to come at the apparent expense of getting *worse* at rapid language processing. As a result, bilingual people are often faced with the peculiar momentary experience of not being able to remember a certain word in their native language despite having it in the forefront of their minds in another, and they also experience tip-of-the-tongue moments twice as often as comparable monolinguals.

Side note: sometimes this is jokingly referred to as being *bye-lingual*, and it reminds me of a dumb story that I used to tell people about a trip I took to Argentina a few months before moving to Germany—because after ten days of visiting a Spanish-speaking country, while staying with a native English-speaking buddy of mine, and coming from a Portuguese-speaking country of residence (where I had also been studying German for an hour per day ahead of my anticipated move), for a good period of time I was absolutely god-awful at four languages.

So anyway, there are two main explanations that experts will generally use to explain the slower lexical retrieval in bilinguals. The first one is that there's an increase in lag due to their higher lexical volume and lower lexical frequency (meaning bilinguals don't use all of the words they know in either language nearly as often as monolinguals do, therefore the layover in Mindville takes them a bit longer, seeing as their concept-word connections are less snappy). This account is supported by the finding that word retrieval is slower for low-frequency words than it is for high-frequency words in both monolinguals and bilinguals alike—*which is to be expected*—however this effect is also exacerbated in bilinguals. Alternatively, the other explanation for slower word

retrieval in bilinguals is that it's caused by a unique conflict resolution process that is needed when both languages are competing for the mind's attention. This is based on behavioral, eye-tracking, and functional MRI evidence which indicates that both languages are active in bilingual brains simultaneously. Neat stuff.

Before moving on (and then hopefully wrapping this whole thing up), there's also a third explanation that I want to mention, and this has to do with the additional phonemes that bilinguals have to account for—because not all languages use the same sounds, and distinguishing between them may cause additional interference and/or lag.[47]

Furthermore, it's also possible (and extremely likely) that non-native speakers will comprehend some of these foreign phonemes imprecisely, meaning their individual acquisitions of these unfamiliar sounds can be either slightly or significantly different from how native speakers will say them in everyday life. (Case in point: thick accents are a thing.) This ultimately leads to the idea that phonological information is an overall weaker cue in bilinguals than it is in monolinguals, and it can also explain some of those infuriating situations you encounter as a beginner when you're talking to a native speaker who doesn't recognize a given word that you're trying to say (because your pronunciation is slightly off), so you have to keep repeating it until they finally say something like, "Oh, do you mean *Geldautomat?*" (Meanwhile you're standing there like, "Yes, *oh mein Gott,* that's *exactly* what I've been saying this whole time!")

In any case, the reason why I bring all three of these up is not to claim that any one of them is truer than the others (because they're all pretty viable in their own right, and they could easily coexist as well); instead, it's to point out the bizarre observation that the frequency-lag account appears to be a linguistic experience, the competition account appears to be a cognitive experience, and the phonological account appears to be a practical experience. See where I'm going with this? Because (I may just be bullshitting here, but) it seems to me that the first one has to do with language, the second one has to do with the mind, and

the third one has to do with the real world. *Semiotic triangle, anyone*?!

Alright, so I guess that just about wraps up what I can only imagine must've been the longest lecture on amatuer linguistics that nobody ever asked for. I think it's fairly obvious at this point that I could probably learn about this stuff forever, and talk about it for even longer. And despite how I may or may not have been completely accurate or inaccurate with every little thing I've brought up here (*because how could I knowingly know*), I really am passionate about this stuff, and I do subscribe to the idea that language is deeply intertwined with how we understand reality. That's probably why I'm so eager to see how much better I can get at German despite how Oscar Wilde (or Richard Porson, I'm not really sure) said that life is too short to learn it, because I'm genuinely curious to see what becoming great at German would to my worldview(s). I mean, surely I could benefit from the other aspects, too, like starting with the end in mind, and thinking things through more often, and it also wouldn't hurt for me to be more organized overall. Case in point: remember that catalogue of language-related observations I brought up earlier? That's a real thing, and it was a total nightmare for me to sort through. In fact, there's still a lot of one-off gems left over that I either couldn't find a place to put, or simply skipped over by accident, so if you don't mind, I'm just going to rattle them off now and then call it a day.

Side note: I recognize that I've been yanking you down all of these rabbitholes without ever giving any actual tips on how to study and/or learn a foreign language. I think I should at least start out by sharing one thing that I recommend doing, and one thing that I recommend avoiding, so I'm gonna start with those and then get to the rest of the goodies.

The thing I recommend doing is to watch foreign content with exclusively foreign subtitles, and to watch more foreign content than native content overall. There was another study out of Barcelona which reaffirmed the suspicion that watching foreign language movies and TV shows helps improve listening comprehension, however this time there was notable twist, namely that watching with subtitles not only enhances the benefits when they're in the foreign

language, but it also eliminates the benefits when they're in the viewer's native language. (I.e., watching a foreign film/series increased the average participant's foreign language comprehension by 7 percent when they watched without subtitles, 17 percent when they watched with foreign subtitles, and a big fat goose egg of 0 percent when they watched with subtitles in their native language.)

The thing that I don't recommend doing is allowing your brain to refuse to learn the most important cue for the foreign language out of protest (as I foolishly did with case markings in German). The fact is, by overlooking case markings (because I thought they were annoying and over-complicated for no reason), I was ignoring the most important cue for processing German like a native adult. And by the way, the tendency to cut the wrong corners like this is not unique to me, or even German for that matter; for instance, beginners of French will often skip over what are known as 'clitics' (which I'm also going to skip over, but suffice it to say that clitic pronouns are the most valid cues in French), because they mistakenly see them as replacements for nouns. Don't do shit like this. Take the time to actually learn the tedious things, or you may not progress any faster than a toddler would.

Okay, home stretch. Please enjoy these interesting linguistic facts and/or observations.

The Russian language only has one form of the present tense, which means that there's no difference between things like, "I work," "I do work," "I am working," and "I have been working." Instead, it's all just "I work." (Suddenly the Russian form of broken-English makes sense now, doesn't it?)

In English, sometimes when we're on the phone (or radio) we say 'niner' instead of 'nine' so that people with poor connections don't confuse it with the German word for 'no' (*nein*) or the number five. Similarly, German speakers will often say *zwo* instead of *zwei* ('two') so as to not confuse it with *drei* ('three'). Lastly,

in Portuguese, sometimes people will replace *seis* ('six') with *meia* ('half a dozen') so as to not confuse it with *sete* ('seven').

On the topic of everyone getting together and voting about issues in English, I feel like we need to decide once and for all if there's actually a difference between 'off' and 'off of' (as in, "It fell off the table" and "It fell off of the table"), because if there's *not* a difference, then we should probably trim the fat there. I also think we should figure out what to do with the whole 'lay down' vs 'lie down' debacle. That shit is whack.

There's a thing on the Merriam-Webster website called Time Traveler, and if you plug in a year, it'll spit out a handful of terms that made their first recorded appearance in its print dictionary during that year. In 1990, for example, that's when 'clapback' was first introduced. Same goes for hoodie, twentysomething, spam, intelligent design, lithium ion battery, left-click, tighty-whities, shout-out, hand gel, geek out, and mixed martial arts. (And despite the fact that some of those things *did* exist before we had a word for them, doesn't it sort of feel like none of them did?)

Depending on how you look at it, the word 'worldview' is either a loan rendering or a direct calque of the German word *Weltanschauung* (meaning 'world-outlook' or 'world point of view'). This came to English in the 1800s thanks to German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who used it to describe people's conceptual presuppositions, beliefs, and values related to the physical and social world. Alternatively, another German philosopher by the name of Wilhelm Von Humboldt introduced the term *Weltansicht* (meaning 'world-view' or 'world-sight'), and this was meant to describe people's worldviews under the confines of a linguistic system. Clever bastard. (*Btw, I don't know how the hell I failed to mention this one earlier*.)

I think it's weird how a word like 'juicy' can not only mean 'full of juice' on the inside *and* 'covered in juice' on the outside, but it can also mean juice-*like* (as in

the juicy mouth-feel of a beer or something). In comparison, a word like 'bloody' is really only used to mean full of blood and/or covered in blood, isn't it? (Wait no, that's wrong, because if something 'looks' bloody, then I guess that would mean it looks blood-like. *But whatever, either way it's still weird to me that they both have all three of those meanings*.) Also, does 'pissy' even mean any of those things in relation to piss? I feel like any time someone says 'pissy' they're using it to mean 'angry' or 'fussy' (unless they're giving it a one-time nonce meaning to say that their pants are all pissy or something).

Speaking of ~~nonsense~~ nonces, 'niblings' is a nonce word that was invented because of English's lack of ~~gender equality~~ a single collective noun for nieces and nephews. (*I kinda missed this one earlier in the nonexistent words section*.) Similarly, English is also missing a word that encompasses both aunts and uncles, and the reverse is true for the word 'cousins,' since there's no English distinction between a male and female cousin (unless you count *cousine* as a loanword from French). Lastly, and true to form, English *does* have an adjective that means 'uncle-like' (aka *avuncular*), but there isn't anything that means 'aunt-like' (unless you count *formic*, which of course means '*ant*-like').[48]

The gender difference between the words 'host' and 'hostess' is directly responsible for the nonce word, *mostest*. (Or is it *mostess*? I can't remember which fake word is real.)

Closely related to nonces, there are also words that we use in English whenever we forget the name of something (or whenever we simply don't know what else to call it), such as *thingamajig* and *whosie-whatsit*. These are called *cadigans* and/or *placeholder names*, and they exist in other languages, too. (Don't quote me on this, but from what I hear, the English word *whatchamacallit* is synonymous with *naninani* in Japanese, *zamazingo* in Turkish, *himstregims* in Danish, *Dingsbums* in German, *huppeldepup* in Dutch, and *trucmuche* in French. Also, fun fact: *Dingsbums* is one of the few German nouns that can be applied to any of its three grammatical genders, meanwhile the German word for 'spork' can only be masculine. *That reminds me, spoons are masculine, forks are*

feminine, and knives are neutral in German. How did you do?)

Interestingly enough, sometimes multiple languages will even use the same preexisting words as placeholders, and this goes beyond their respective translations for words like 'thingy' and 'stuff' (which are more like designated placeholders). For example, the word 'business' is often a placeholder for some kind of vague activity in English (as in, "He's got some business to do on the other side of town"), meanwhile in Brazilian Portuguese, the word *negocio* ('business') is often used in place of vague objects (as in, "Make sure to bring that little business with you"), sorta like the word '*doohickey*' in English.

Side note: when it comes to your everyday polysemy across languages (like the way 'horn' is used to mean both the instrument and the animal part in a bunch of languages), I don't think anything is more brain-explodey to me than how the words 'back' in English and *Rücken* ('back') in German share so many overlapping applications. Of course, the words *do* take on several different forms in their respective languages, but for whatever etymologically fascinating reason, you can use *Rücken* in German for the part of the body (as in "My back hurts"), *Rückseite* to mean 'the opposite side' (as in "The back of a book"), *rückwärts* for the direction (as in "Go backwards"), and finally, you can use *zurück* again and again to mean things like 'farther away' (as in "Stay back"), 'returned' (as in "The king is back"), 'not forward' (as in "Don't hold me back") and 'in its previous state or condition' (as in "Remember to give it back"). I don't know how the hell all of these things have stood the test of time like that, given how easy it would've been for them *not* to. For example, an English sentence like, "There's a door in the back" would call for the word *Hinten* (aka 'behind') when translated into German, and a sentence like, "That happened ten years back" would similarly call for the word *vor* (aka 'prior' or 'before').

One of the most versatile features of language that English hardly ever uses (to the point where it almost seems like it doesn't even have the feature) is diminutization. This is when you take words like *duck, pig,* and *pipe* and create smaller versions of them, like *duckling, piglet,* and *pipette*. On the flipside,

Brazilian Portuguese is extremely well-known for its excessive use of both diminutives and superlatives (to the point where it's often made fun of for it), however a great deal of these terms are used as entirely distinct word-concepts. For example, the diminutive of the word *só* (meaning 'only' or 'just') is the Portuguese word for 'alone' (*sózinho*). Similarly, the diminutive of the word *paus* ('sticks') is the actual Portuguese word for chopsticks (*pauzinhos*), and the superlative of *paus* is a slang term used to mean pornstar-sized dongs (*pauzões*). Furthermore—*if that didn't tickle your fancy already*—the diminutive of the word *camisa* ('shirt') is also the common word for 'condom' in Portuguese (*camisinha*, and that apparently stemmed out of an old-fashioned term meaning the same thing, *Camisa de Venus* ('shirt from Venus'). Of course, I still have absolutely no idea what that's supposed to mean even after looking it up, however I did manage to stumble across some equally interesting past and present translations for condoms in other languages as a result, such as 'English cloak' in Old French, 'French letters' in British English, 'safety tools' in Hungarian, 'insurance cover' (and/or 'avoid-pregnancy cover') in Mandarin, and 'bulletproof vest' in Cantonese.

I'm pretty sure that the phrase 'two thousand and late' is autological at this point.

I'm also halfway convinced that I might be the first person ever to discover that 'punintentional' is an autological pun. (*Hear me out for a second*.) I've looked far and wide on the internet to see if anyone else has ever said anything about this, and all I could find were a few posts on Urban Dictionary acknowledging the fact that the made-up word 'punintentional' has the ability to go either way (i.e., it can either be a pun/portmanteau of the words 'pun' and 'intentional' or of the words 'pun' and 'unintentional'). However, 'punintentional' itself is *also* a pun that can *only* ever be intentional or unintentional, and up until now, I just don't think that anyone else has ever pointed out the fact that all puns are therefore punintentional, including punintentional itself. (And to me that's some crazy shit, because like, even 'punbelievable' is not punbelievable, but 'punintentional' is *always* punintentional.) Side note: there's also a far more academic-related opposite of this known as the Grelling-Nelson paradox, and that deals with whether or not the word 'heterological' (aka the opposite of

autological) is heterological. *Hint: it's neither.*

If you really get your face into it and over-enunciate, you can physically cringe when you say the word 'cringe.' You can also squint a little bit when you say the word 'squint,' and if you happen to have a lisp, there's a decent chance that you already have trouble just saying the word 'lisp.' *I wonder what it's called when a word makes you perform its definition.*

I think it's weird that the word 'still' sometimes has the ability to make you literally *be* still for a moment after you hear it. Like, if somebody starts a sentence with, "Yeah that's true, but still," aren't you then prompted to pause for a split-second (at least mentally) until they finish that thought? *Am I making sense here?*

Also, the phrase 'makes sense' is such a strange expression given what it's supposed to mean, as if something 'creates' sense itself. Like, wouldn't the sense have already been there in most cases? And doesn't it make *more* sense to say that something 'has' sense anyway? That's how a bunch of other languages do it. I guess we do have the words 'sensical' and 'sensible' in English, but in German they have the word *sinnvoll*, which is essentially 'senseful.' Now *that* makes sense.

You know what else makes sense? *Not* the way we talk about senses in general, I'll tell you that. I mean, why is 'tasty' usually good and 'smelly' usually bad? And how come 'touchy' and 'feely' exist but 'heary' and 'soundy' do not? And is 'sightly' even a real word, or is 'unsightly' the only one?

One of the more recent times I ran across the word 'undisclosed' in English, I started wondering why we didn't have the word 'undisgruntled' as well—but then I looked it up and found that there was once a book written in 1859 called

Dictionary of Americanisms, and in a later edition of it in 1877, it noted that the word 'undisgruntled' had been seen in an newspaper from Springfield, Massachusetts in 1869. *Good lookin' out, legendary author of that book.*

There used to be a guy on the Food Network by the name of Alton Brown, and one of the things he was best-known for was his personal vendetta against 'unitaskers' (i.e., kitchen gadgets and appliances that were designed to perform only one job apart from taking up counter or drawer space, like a breakfast sandwich maker, or a kiwi peeler). Sometimes I feel like English is just a bunch of unitaskers. Take a look at these verbs that are almost never used as verbs for anything other than individual parts of the face and/or head area: *crane* your neck, *squint* your eyes, *bat* your eyelashes, *furrow* your brow, *purse* your lips, *flare* your nostrils, *clench* your ~~buttcheeks~~ jaw, *flap* your gums, *bare* your teeth, *grit* your teeth, *crinkle* your nose, *perk* your ears, and *puff* your cheeks. It's almost as if the people who decided that stuff were deliberately making things difficult, right? In fact, there was a time during the Late Middle Ages when that literally *was* the case.

Have you ever come across some of those really extravagant collective nouns for specific animals (such as a 'dazzle' of zebra or a 'parliament' of owls)? Well, those are called *nouns of assembly* and/or *terms of venery*, and they supposedly stemmed out of an English hunting tradition in the 14th century, when it became highly fashionable/dignified to expand certain parts of the vocabulary for very little reason other than showing off. (They would unnecessarily assign different names to the same parts/features of different animals, for example.) By the time the 15th century rolled around, this trend became wildly exaggerated, and that led to what I can only imagine was a ~~group of~~ mouthful of linguists getting together for a massive, piss-drunk party called the Collective Noun Fuckaround or something. (I mean, how else would we have landed on an 'aurora' of polar bears, a 'murmuration' of starlings, a 'band' of gorillas, a 'flamboyance' of flamingos, a 'charm' of hummingbirds, a 'muster' of peacocks, and a 'caravan' of camels?) For people trying to learn English, these words must appear to be part of some sick, twisted joke—and yet a ton of them have survived to the point where it's not even unusual for us to use them in everyday conversations (e.g., 'school' of fish, 'gaggle' of geese, 'pride' of lions). Nevertheless, if it weren't

for all of this history, I suppose we never would've been blessed with that one dadjoke about the flock of cows that I like so much (i.e., "Herd of cows? Of course I've heard of cows, there's a whole flock of 'em right over there!"), so it was probably worth it in the end.

The word 'gargantuan' comes from a five-part series of French novels written in the 16th century about a giant named Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. The author, François Rabelais, credited the name of Gargantua (and his parents, Grandgosier and Gargamelle) to an anonymous chapbook published right around the same time. Now, regardless of how Rabelais got all the eventual fortune and fame, can you imagine being the person who first dreamt up Gargantua, and then roughly 500 years later people were still saying the word 'gargantuan' as a result of that work? What an incredible legacy. It's like, "Yeah, I've been dead for half a millenium, but people are still saying this goofy word I made up when I was tripping on shrooms, loooool." Kinda makes you wonder why the guy who brought the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis into light (who was a student of Sapir, who was a colleague of Whorf) didn't name the damn thing after himself. What a ~~fucking idiot~~ loyal pupil, am I right?

I've always wondered what it would be like to come up with a brand new word like that, or to be the originator of some hot new slang. Back when I was writing columns in college, there was a new campus building being put up called the Discovery Learning Center, and I tried to use my reach to get everyone on campus to start calling it 'The Disco' instead of its inevitable acronym, DLC. Sadly it never caught on (so I never got to tell anyone that I was at the disco all night), and that's when I finally knew how Frank Lloyd Wright probably felt when he tried to come up with a more appropriate word for 'American' (which I totally mentioned back in Chapter 9) and landed on *Usonian*.[49]

I guess there are a lot of words out there that we could've done a better job with. Just look at the word 'airbag,' for example. We only invented those 50 years ago, and all things considered, I feel like we could've been a bit more creative than a *bag* of *air*. That's just dreadful, isn't it? Hell, even *air-shield* would've

been better than that, and that ~~sucks~~ blows. Why not *wind-brace,* or perhaps *gust-guard*? Wait a sec, I think I've got it: *safety-puff.*

Seriously though, if I had the chance to invent a word, here's what I think it would be: do you know how the lines of text in a paragraph are sometimes arranged in such a way so that the spaces between two words on each line will inadvertently create a straight and/or diagonal pathway up and down the text? I think that should be called a 'textisle' (pronounced like 'text-aisle' or 'textile'). *See you in 500 years.*

Okay, so that's that. As much as it pains me to say this, ~~"buckle"~~ it's time for this giant *sanemagogna* to end. That said, I'm not quite sure if I'd even be *able* to tie everything together in a cute little full-circle conclusion like I (*as per*) usually do, so I'm just gonna finish things off with two perfectly balanced quotes that I came across when I was researching the bajillion things I had to look up in order to fact-check myself (and to make it sound like I knew what I was talking about).

The first is from the homie David Foster Wallace (in his posthumously published unfinished novel, *The Pale King*): "How odd I can have all this inside me and to you it's just words."

The second is from Erasmus Darwin (aka Chuckie D's grandfather): "The excessive study of words is universally an ill employment of any time of life."

And you know what? After everything I've put into this, there's only one thing I can say to that in response:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but ~~words can never hurt me~~ wow, fuck *that* guy.

…

I wrote this on over a dozen flights, beginning on a flight from Newark to Denver, 3 June 2018 and ending on flight from Paris to Krakow, 25 July 2018. (*Of course, if we want to mince words about how much of this was researched, drafted, pre-written, edited, rewritten, polished, re-edited, and re-polished on solid ground, well then that's just semantics*.)

XXX

1. Some other fun ones to play with include "beer can" for Jamaican English, "whale oil beef hooked" for Irish English, and "my cocaine" for how Michael Caine would say his own name. (Remember to say them fast if you can't get it.) ↑

2. *Hey look, they have numbers now. Neat!* ↑

3. And even that number is kind of inflated, since 13.5 percent of Americans are bilingual due to English being their second language. So in the spirit of what I'm getting at, we're probably talking about a number that's closer to 10 percent, which is roughly the same share of EU citizens that speak *four* languages. (Thank you, Luxembourg. *No, not you Switzerland, you're not in the EU*.) ↑

4. Cue that amazing scene from *Modern Family* when Sofía Vergara's character flubs a couple of English phrases, gets corrected, and then says, "I know what I *meant* to *mean*, do you even know how smart I am in Spanish?" ↑

5. Not to be confused with autological words (which I brought up back in Chapter 10). Those are words that fit their own definitions, like how 'unhyphenated' has zero hyphens in it, or how 'English' is an English word. Fun fact: there are also words that are only autological at certain times, like whenever the word 'mentioned' is mentioned, or whenever 'repeated' is repeated, or whenever 'unfinished' is unfini, or whenever 'redundant' is redundant. (And not that you asked, but I think my personal favorite is the word 'cacophonous,' because saying that out loud is sort of cacophonous, yet writing it down isn't cacophonous at all—*unless you're writing it on a chalkboard with a nail or some shit*.) ↑

6. Some people will squabble over whether the Bard really came up with them or if he was merely the first person to put them in writing, but in any case here's a bunch of good ones that he gave us: *hunchbacked, plumpy, scuffle, eavesdropping, full-circle, auspicious, good riddance, dwindle, foregone conclusion*, and *one fell swoop*. Also, these days we do a lot of turning nouns into verbs to create entirely new concepts (e.g., *ghosting, adulting, Netflix and chilling*), but Shakespeare would regularly turn verbs into nouns as well (e.g., *luggage, belongings, exposure*), and I think that's super

underrated. [↑]

7. Seeing as I have no problem using words like *kinda*, *sorta*, and *gonna* (because I think they flow better sometimes), nor do I stop myself from embracing abbreviations like *btw*, *wtf*, and *lol* (because I like how they work stylistically). Furthermore, I'm clearly not beholden to any previous and/or non-American forms of English either, although I do like to think that I take a few Britishisms into consideration. (*Is it Britishisms or Briticisms?*) For instance, I definitely prefer the spellings of *racquet* and *dialogue* over *racket* and *dialog* for some reason, and I'm pretty sure I've also said 'maths' as a joke so many times that now I've adopted it permanently, lol. Then again, I do kinda hate it when people spell things like 'learned' and 'spelled' like 'spelt' and 'learnt' (with the only exception being when T-Pain came out with an album called *Rappa Ternt Sanga*), so I guess that's an inconsistency that only makes things worse. [↑]

8. Supposedly, one of those sentences tells you to 'have it done by' tomorrow, while the other one tells you to 'do it' tomorrow. These days, however, because we're so accustomed to saying the 'is' version for both cases, sometimes it's hard to tell which one is which—and shit, for all I know, maybe I'm completely wrong and they're both equally ambiguous on their own. (So in that case a better example is how we've started to replace both 'had been' in the past tense and 'were' in the present subjunctive with an ambiguous 'was,' as in a sentence like, "Imagine if I was late." Here, the difference is that by using 'had been,' it's clear that the speaker was *not* late to something that already began, and by using 'were,' it's clear that the speaker *might still be* late to something that hasn't begun yet.) [↑]

9. You can thank Shakespeare again for that one. True to form though, supposedly Dub-Shak was just iterating on medieval Latin's *honorificabilitudinitas* as a joke, and it's apparently the longest word of alternating consonants and vowels ever made in English (which is neat I guess, but it's still overkill if you ask me). [↑]

10. The saving lives thing was just a dumb segue, but this is a real thing that you can find in the mothereffing dictionary. You can even shop categorically for *tomara-que-caias* in certain stores and online. [↑]

11. That always makes me think of Dorothy at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*:

"But it wasn't a dream. It was a place. And you, and you, and you...and you were there." ↑

12. Fun fact: the Habitual Be exists in Irish Gaelic and Scottish Gaelic as well, however it's used as both the present habitual and the future tense in Scottish Gaelic. I have no idea how that works. ↑

13. Btw, this is an example of a figure of speech called litotes, which is when we deliberately emphasize a double negative for the added effect, sort of like an ironic understatement. On a related note, I don't think I can reach this point and *not* bring up the following scene from the movie *Clue* (a cult classic based on the board game), when Colonel Mustard is trying to get clarification from Wadsworth the butler (played by Tim Curry):

    Col. Mustard: "Wadsworth, am I right in thinking that there is nobody else in this house?"

    Wadsworth: "Mmm, no."

    Col. Mustard: "Then there *is* someone else in this house?"

    Wadsworth: "No, sorry. I said *no* meaning *yes*."

    Col. Mustard: "*No* meaning *yes*? Look, I want a straight answer. Is there someone else, or isn't there? Yes or no?"

    Wadsworth: "Umm, no."

    Col. Mustard: "No there *IS*, or no there *ISN'T*?"

    Wadsworth: "...Yes." ↑

14. I don't want to get us off track by breaking the fourth wall too badly here, but that right there was the Easter egg about the titular line of this book that I mentioned all the way back in the very first footnote of the introduction (so if you've been waiting for that Chekhov gun to fire, then boom, there ya go). ↑

15. Slightly off-topic, but this reminds me of that British comedy sketch where two WWII-era German soldiers are discussing the skull designs on their

helmets, when one of them turns to the other and asks, "*Hans, are we the baddies*?" ↑

16. These things have names, believe it or not; the first one is called semantic satiation, and the second one is (unofficially) called wordnesia. ↑

17. *Hey honey, have you seen my handshoes*?! Btw, German is absolutely chock-full of interesting compound nouns like that; lightbulbs are 'glowpears,' airplanes are 'flythings,' refrigerators are 'coolclosets,' skunks are 'stinkanimals,' nmemonic devices are 'donkeybridges' and best of all (which I'll just give to you in German), birth control pills are *Antibabypillen*. ↑

18. Around the same time that those other adaptations were taking place, Brazil's largest network TV station (*Globo*) had just announced that it was (finally) about to show an on-screen kiss between two men for the very first time—only to end up cutting it at the last minute before airing. It took eight years after that for *Globo* to do so, and apparently even that one was buried since it was aired after 11pm on a Friday night. (For reference, this was all like 13 years after *Dawson's Creek* had the first romantic kiss between two men during primetime TV in the States, which, naturally, was around the same time that *Buffy the ~~Vernacular~~ Vampire Slayer* depicted the very first lesbian sex scene.) ↑

19. I think it's also relevant to point out how the in-group version of the n-word is neither spelled nor spoken the same way as the racist out-group version, and that this semantic narrowing was the result of the in-group's reclamation of the word; meanwhile, when it comes to the f-word in Brazilian Portuguese, both the in-group's semantically reclaimed version and the out-group's derogatory version are spelled and spoken in the exact same way. (I'm not saying that this makes the situation better or worse for either one—*or that you can't say an in-group version in a derogatory way*—but I do think that it's relevant information because it's not always easy to tell the difference when both words are the same.) ↑

20. "Nuh-uh. Superman does good. You're doing *well*."↑

21. Keep in mind that this would only apply to the contractions themselves and not the longform versions, since those *could of* other meanings fairly easily;

however, when it comes to the contractions, those are *always* followed by verbs (or an adverb and then the verb), so there'd never be a case where 'could of' could of meant anything else. (It's kinda like how 'kinda' really only works in situations where it means 'somewhat' or 'a little bit' as opposed to when it means 'type of' or 'variety of,' but I guess some people still use it for that anyway.) ↑

22. I think French and Malay/Indonesian are the only other languages of 100 million plus speakers that can say that. *I mean*, I'm sure other languages can *say* that, but you know what I'm saying. (*Boooo*.) ↑

23. ...and boom goes the dynamite. ↑

24. Is it *La Kwah*? Is it *La Croy*? Look, all I know is that it's from La Crosse, Wisconsin, which is the same town where they brewed the original *Four Loko* alcoholic energy drinks that got taken off the shelves for being "not safe to drink in a single sitting" back when I was in Wisconsin for college, so I just assumed *La Croix* was pronounced the same way as La Crosse even though the cans were probably designed to look all French-like to sell more product—kinda like how Häagen-Dazs was meant to sound like a Danish brand of ice cream even though it's from Brooklyn. Also, fun fact: like 80 years before Häagen-Dazs was founded, a dairyman from New York pulled off a similar stunt when he decided to name his cream cheese brand *Philadelphia*, and now it's kind of funny that Philadelphia is not only responsible for making New York style cheesecake famous, but it's also the name of the classic salmon and cream cheese sushi roll. ↑

25. *I'm not smiling, you're smiling*. ↑

26. I'm only half kidding, but despite how 'Anglicism' encompasses all varieties of English, it should be clear that the fear of linguistic imperialism became overwhelmingly directed towards American English shortly after World War I. ↑

27. This is still a thing today, and as recently as 1994 the French government passed a law mandating not only that French be used in all workplaces, advertisements, and commercial contracts, but also that schools would not be eligible to receive government funding unless they taught their curriculum in French. ↑

28. Okay, I'm smiling this time. ↑

29. Btw, this isn't to say that regular etymologies can't be just as weird on their own, like how the word 'bikini' comes from an atoll in the Marshall Islands called Pikinni (which means 'surface of coconuts' in Marshallese); later on, when the atoll was colonized as part of German New Guinea, the name was adopted as Bikini. Then, in 1946, the US held a peacetime nuclear weapons test on the atoll, and continued to refer to it by this new name. Around that same time, a French designer introduced a revealing swimsuit that he hoped would create a similarly explosive reaction in Paris, and he borrowed the name from the atoll in an attempt to piggyback off its limelight. ↑

30. Another example would be how the English words 'remind' and 'remember' are oftentimes expressed via the same verb in other languages (because you can say "Remember me to feed the dog when we get home" and people would still know what you mean). Alternatively, one of these blends that has given me trouble in the past is how the words 'wait,' 'expect,' and 'hope' can all be expressed by the verb *esperar* in both Portuguese and Spanish (because that makes it kind of weird whenever you try to *esperar* ('hope') for the best and *esperar* ('expect') the worst. ↑

31. Here's a cute story that might explain why that's the case: one of Spain's greatest playwrights was a man named Miguel de Unamuno, and he once described Portuguese as "*Español sin hueso*" ("Spanish without bones"). Roughly a hundred years or so later, one of *Brazil's* greatest playwrights, Ariano Saussuna, responded by saying, "*O Espanhol é uma língua que tem sílaba demais nas palavras e palavra demais nas frases*." ("Spanish is a language that has too many syllables in its words and too many words in its sentences.") What's funny about that is, even that particular sentence requires two additional words and nine additional syllables to say in Spanish (assuming you translate it word-for-word): "*El español es una lengua que tiene demasiadas sílabas en las palabras y demasiadas palabras en las frases*." ↑

32. *What's that? You say it's the other way around?* Yeah, okay, pigeon hater. (You're damn right I'm still not over the pigeons!) Here's a quick question for you: do you know why those two words aren't *pigeontail* and *dovehole* instead? Because this is an outrage, that's why. Also, I'm pretty sure that the pigeon has been my one true spirit animal all this time... ↑

33. I should also point out that Kevin James did a highly relevant bit about phone number rhythm in his *Sweat the Small Stuff* stand-up special from like 15 or 20 years ago. I guarantee that it's still funny today (but you don't have to go looking it up now or anything... *unless you want to*), and last I checked it was still on Netflix (ATOW). ↑

34. It works because the word 'buffalo' is a place *and* a verb (albeit an uncommon one that means 'to bully') *and* an animal *and* it does not require an 's' on the end of it to become plural. So, as a result, the full sentence means that Bison from New York (who are bullied by other bison from New York) also happen to bully other bison from New York—and an equivalent, much more digestible sentence with the same exact word order would therefore be, "American eagles [that] Chinese dragons chase[,] chase Russian bears [themselves]." It's tricky but once you hear it the right way it starts to click. ↑

35. Btw, the book in question was called *Elements of Eloquence* (which I *did* end up buying, but I also haven't taken it out of the shrinkwrap yet, so unfortunately I won't be ~~borrowing~~ flash robbing any more ideas after this one). ↑

36. Btw, the reason why it's 'had' instead of 'have' in this case is because this sentence calls for the subjunctive in German (similar to how we might say something like, "You *had* better leave now or else you'll be late" in English). ↑

37. He even wrote extensively about it in an essay called *The Awful German Language*: "The Germans have another kind of parenthesis, which they make by splitting a verb in two and putting half of it at the beginning of an exciting chapter and the other half at the end of it. Can anyone conceive of anything more confusing than that? These things are called 'separable verbs.' The German grammar is blistered all over with separable verbs; and the wider the two portions of one of them are spread apart, the better the author of the crime is pleased with his performance. A favorite one is *reiste ab*—which means 'departed.' Here is an example which I culled from a novel and reduced to English: The trunks being now ready, he *DE-* after kissing his mother and sisters, and once more pressing to his bosom his adored Gretchen, who, dressed in simple white muslin, with a single tuberose in the ample folds of her rich brown hair, had tottered feebly down

the stairs, still pale from the terror and excitement of the past evening, but longing to lay her poor aching head yet once again upon the breast of him whom she loved more dearly than life itself, *PARTED*." ↑

38. Oh boy. I mean girl. I mean fuck. I should know better. (Why am I not editing this out? Note to self: you're an asshole, and you're fired.)↑

39. I took the liberty of looking up the gender of knives, forks, and spoons in every single one of those other languages just to make that joke (so I hope to god you liked it, lol). I even looked them up in Old English (which also had three genders, fyi) just to be safe. ↑

40. I'm not really accusing you of thinking about that, I'm just reminding you that it's there. And besides, you're the one thinking about nip-slips right now, not me. ↑

41. Btw, there's also nine or ten different German words for 'slippers' (with translations like 'slouchers' and 'sleepers'), but that doesn't really count because they're mostly just regional differences rather than grammatical. Nevertheless, the reason why I bring this up is because one of the most common words for 'slippers' is *Hausschuhe* (aka 'house shoes'), and that's just right up my alley. ↑

42. But seriously, there's a thing called word-sense disambiguation, and even though humans can do this rather flawlessly, the best AI language processing systems are still struggling to figure it out. One example is the question, "If a snowman melts and then freezes again, does it turn back into a snowman?" Training computers to answer tons of questions like this is ultimately super difficult because most individual examples rely on unique details and/or 'extralinguistic' knowledge (aka interlinked understandings of human social contexts). ↑

43. For those with a basic understanding of logic notation, the most natural translation would be something like, "for every x [[farmer x & there exists y [donkey y & x owns y]] → [x beats y]]," but this doesn't really make sense because the 'y' at the end is an unbound variable. (So like, 'a donkey' would therefore have a wider scope than 'every farmer,' and that would mean there's at least one donkey that every farmer owns and beats, but that's clearly not what the sentence means in the first place, and not every

farmer owns a donkey anyway.) [↑]

44. The other two are when you're able to flirt with strangers at a noisy bar without asking them to repeat themselves, and when native speakers finally stop complimenting you on how well you speak (*and just speak to you like they would anyone else*). [↑]

45. *Do you have any idea how dumb I am in English?!* [↑]

46. To be a bit more clear, when the second study tested the original dilemma, once again only one out of five respondents who were given the problem in their native language said they would push the man, however this time the respondents who said they would push him after receiving it in a foreign language were closer to one in two. Meanwhile, when it came to the other dilemma (aka the one with the switch), four out of five respondents in every language group said they would make the sacrifice. (So that means four out of five native English speakers who got the problem in English, four out of five native English speakers who got the problem in Spanish, four out of five native Spanish speakers who got the problem in English, and four out of five native Spanish speakers who got the problem in Spanish would all pull the switch.) [↑]

47. I don't really want to dig too deep into phonemes and pronunciations here (because I'd probably try to blame Portuguese again for some of my struggles with German), but suffice it to say that there are sounds in other languages that don't exist in others, so you have to train your mouth to get used to saying them, and your ears to get used to hearing them. In fact, some sounds that exist in multiple languages can even be used in frustratingly different ways, like how the sound of the letter 'h' at the start of English words like 'huge' and 'human' is sometimes used in the very middle of German words with the letters 'ch' in them, such as *möchte* and *Eichhörnchen*. Try saying those three times fast, once. [↑]

48. Now that's just terrible. [↑]

49. Which was just as garbage as some of the other options, like *Statesian*, *Washingtonian*, and *Freedonian*. Personally, I think *Appalachian* was probably the best sounding one at the time (but I guess it was too much to ask to take people's land *and* their name for it), and *Yankeean* may have

worked too, if US citizens hadn't already begun hating each other, lol. ↑

Chapter 22: Content Generation

You know, you'd think visiting 25 countries in a year would've helped a guy like me get better at ~~not bringing it up all the time~~ reading maps and directions and stuff, but nope, I'm still god-awful at it. In fact, my visual-spatial 'skills' are soooo bad [*this is the part where a live studio audience would be instructed to chant, "How… bad… are they?"*] that whenever a stranger lines up behind me at one of those big-ass directories at the entrance of a regular-ass shopping mall (or something similar), I have no choice but to get my dumb ass out of the way. If not, I'll either take too long on my own (and they'll end up cutting in front of me anyway), or worse, I'll start to *worry* about taking too long (and then I'll just black out).

Don't get me wrong, I'm still perfectly capable of getting around when I'm traveling and whatnot, but that's mostly because the GPS on my phone is able to act like one of those giant 'You are HERE' stickers for me at all times—which, to be fair, *might* have something to do with why I suck at reading maps in the first place. Then again, for as much as I rely on my phone for navigation, I should probably be able to figure out which direction it *thinks* I'm facing without having to walk in circles every time I pop out of a metro station.

And not to be a doomsdayer or anything, but can you imagine what it would be like if the theoretical plug were ever pulled on all of the satellites? I mean, for starters, we'd probably have to go back to relying on helicopter-based traffic reports again (as opposed to whatever mixture of crowdsourced mobile phone location data that most people don't even realize we're all a part of today), and I bet we'd also have to go back to asking people for directions the old-fashioned way, like, "Take this road to that road, hang a left at the third light, and if you see a man selling rutabagas, you've gone too far." I suppose there *would* be a certain degree of nostalgia to that, which is cool, but it's still nowhere near as simple as just nodding along vacantly and then saying, "Okay sweet, but what's the address? I'm gonna plug it in anyway."

When you think about it, it's pretty wild how much brain power our phones have been able to free up for us in such a relatively short period of time since their inception. Need directions on the highway? Here you go. Need a calculator at a restaurant? Here you go. Need a personal trainer at the gym? Here you go. Need a typewriter on an airplane? Here you go. It kinda makes me wonder about what percentage of time the average person uses their phone as an actual phone these days, and it also makes me wonder just how much more of our daily lives/activities depend on our phones with each passing year.

One of the things that tends to suck about this topic (i.e., technological reliance and/or overreliance) is that it always seems to get turned into a generational thing, which is such a dry and unoriginal narrative if you ask me. It's like, yeah, maybe I *do* tip 20 percent at every restaurant no matter what because I can't do mental maths anymore without spiking my heart rate, but shit, I don't see people from older generations building fires from scratch every time they want to light a candle. (*Are Boy Scouts even a thing anymore?*) At the end of the day, improving access to available technology is just sort of *what we do* as humans, so as long as we're aware of the basics behind whatever is getting replaced (e.g., twigs and sticks plus friction equals fire), then why *shouldn't* we use what's available to us if it's easier, faster, and far more reliable? (*Wait, what's the address again? I forgot to plug it in.*)

Truth be told, we've already crossed the line into becoming cyborgs anyway (seeing as we're at least psychologically attached to our phones, if not physically), and now the only thing that's truly stopping us from reaching our full cybernetic potential is the dreadfully slow speed at which our fingers can type (accurately) on our keyboards/touchscreens. In fact, even the speed at which we can type innacruately [*sic*] is still a pitiful joke compared to the 1.8 GHz clock speed of the Snapdragon 650 CPU that's inside of the phone where I keep my notes (and probably wrote half of this book with). It's like, even if the processing capacity of the human mind were to make an impossible leap to, let's say, 1.2 million bits per second (*up from its present day rate of only ~120 bits per second, according to Bell Labs, as well as a Hungarian psychologist whose*

name I can accurately ~~type~~ copy-paste as Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who also happened to coin the term 'flow state'), the difference between 1.2 million bits per second and 1.8 billion bits per second...is still around ~1.8 billion bits per second. As a result, until we stumble upon a way to speed that shit up, like, super-exponentially, it really doesn't look like we'll be moving on from our phones any time soon—which I guess is fine, seeing as we're already so attached to them that we feel naked and/or powerless whenever we tap on our pockets and notice that they aren't there for some reason.

Honestly, we could probably go back and forth all day about whether or not our evolution from normies to cyborgs is a definitive step forward for humanity, but it's also kind of irrelevant at this point because it's already the reality that we've adopted little by little (and it's not like we *would* go back now anyway, seeing as the cyborgs have a clear advantage in what modern society has become). This is perhaps an example of something referred to as a creeping normality, which is when a society grows to accept an arguably objectionable change simply because it happens in small, hardly-noticeable increments over time—such as how insulin prices in the US have increased something like 400 percent above inflation over the last twenty years (*you know, because the 'cost of living' and the 'cost of staying alive' are two different things nowadays*), or how mass-shootings in the US all of a sudden became just another Wednesday thing (*you know, because of all the mass-shootings*). Just sayin'.

Anyhow, when it comes to our ever-increasing psychological and/or biological integration with technology, I imagine that one of the more obvious drawbacks would be that the level of trust we have in ourselves (without said technology) is ever-decreasing. I mean, sure, maybe I *do* have an innate sense of *mis*direction, but I still wonder what would happen if I ever truly needed to put it to the test. That said, a few days ago I decided to find out, which I did by turning off my phone the moment my flight landed in Krakow, and not turning it back on until I was aboard my flight from Katowice to Warsaw a whole day and a half later. (*I know, I'm so brave.*)

And ya know what? It wasn't even half bad; getting around town with a map was easy enough (albeit time-consuming), and it was also quite nice *not* to know the exact departure time of every single tram and/or city bus, meaning I was forced to relax for a change rather than trying to time everything as accurately as I normally would. (Besides, it's not like I had an ~~efficiency boner~~ a flight to Athens to catch that would've crushed my dreams had I missed it or anything.)

So all of that was pretty cool, I guess, but there was also something else about the challenge that I was *not* expecting, and that's how tough it was going to be to stop myself from turning my phone back on whenever I got the urge to take pictures and videos of stuff I saw and did. (*Because, come on, did I even travel if I didn't get content?*) With that in mind, here are some of the things that I really wanted to capture on camera (*but couldn't*) during my time in Krakow:

- A man in seemingly normal health and mental state was casually walking down the street at 10am, carrying no belongings, wearing nothing but a pair of gray socks and red underwear. I'm not sure what that was about.
- A really big dog crossed paths with me on the sidewalk. (*I'm talkin' huge.*)
- The city's Old Town Square had some horse-drawn carriages in it that looked a lot cooler than I would've expected them to look.
- There was a restaurant called *Bonerowska*. Couldn't believe my eyes.
- Some of the walkways I went down at the botanical gardens of Jagiellonian University (which is the second oldest university in Central Europe) were super picturesque.
- While I was sitting on a park bench, a little boy—who was apparently at that age where sharing things with strangers is the best thing ever—came over to give me some bread to feed the ducks with him and his mom for a minute. (Btw, the only content I would've gotten in this situation would've been of my own hands feeding the ducks, *not* the child, you friggin' perv. I never even fed the child.)

Alright, so first of all, clearly the bar for content-gathering inspiration can be pretty low sometimes (*or at least mine can be*). Second of all, I think a lot of

people would argue that it's always the little things that turn out to be the most memorable parts of the travel experience anyway, so I don't really know what point I'm trying to make here. On the one hand, I do think that the whole 'live in the real world, not on your screens' thing is valid to a certain extent, but I don't really see why gathering content and living in the quote-unquote "moment" have to be mutually exclusive. (That is, unless we're talking about the kinds of folks who do all of their traveling and/or sightseeing by walking around with those giant tablets in front of their faces, because in that case I totally get it. And btw, if your parents are guilty of taking pictures/videos with their tablets like that, then that's probably your fault more than it is theirs. Just sayin'.)

Anyhow, I suppose the real question that I want the answer to is this: how can we tell if our in-the-moment impulses to gather content are motivated by legitimate desires to capture genuine memories, *or* if they're just automatic cyborg-like responses that may or may not be getting in the way of them? (Again, these don't have to be mutually exclusive or anything, but if one of them were to significantly outweigh the other, how would we ever be able to know?) In my case, for example, I honestly can't say that *not* giving myself the option to use my phone in Krakow *didn't* affect my actions one way or another, and it's just hard to tell what I would and/or wouldn't have done differently in a parallel universe where my phone was turned on. (That is, except for when it comes to the ducks, because I'm pretty frickin' sure I would've fed those guys either way, seeing as I love ducks.)

Tangent: how in the world do mallards even make sense as a species? The males have green heads, yellow bills, white collars, brown breasts, black rears, gray bellies, orange feet, blue accent feathers, and their quacks (along with the quacks of most other ducks) have raised legitimate scientific doubt as to whether or not they truly produce an echo. Seriously, it's like somebody was playing an animal generator game and pushed the random button by accident or something. *But wait, there's more*: because for whatever ridiculous reason, the male mallard also has a ballistic penis that measures 20 centimeters long, with literal barbs on the end of it, that shoots out in the shape of a corkscrew, and I'm not making any of this up. There's even a (satirical but mostly accurate) nature video on YouTube about it called, "True Facts About The Duck," which is narrated by a

guy doing his best Morgan Freeman impression (*because of course it is*), and last time I checked (which is not very often), the video had over 5 million views on it.

It's simply unreal how much random-ass content we pump out these days now that film is digital (aka free) and everyone has a camera (aka phone). Back in the 90s, in comparison, it used to be *so* rare to capture something funny 'on tape' that people would literally mail their VHS home video tapes to Bob Saget in hopes of getting onto his TV show (and having a chance at winning the $100,000 prize for the best clip of the year). For the longest time, *that* was the closest thing we had to viral videos, and we've come such a long way since then, haven't we?

Consider the following: right now (ATOW) there's a video going around of a golden retriever that drags a plastic tub towards a wall, places it underneath a spigot, turns on the water, and then hops inside as it fills up to become his own little doggy pool. This video is nothing short of astounding (*like, perhaps even neck and neck with the ~~fake~~ original moon landing video astounding*), and yet its popularity will last no more than a single day on today's internet. Isn't that insane? I mean, shit, back when chain emails were still a thing, that pupper would've been making the rounds for at least a year and a half, easily surpassing 500 times what it'll last today. And it's not just that either, because due to this new turnover speed, I can't even tell if that dog video is something I'd ever be able to make references to in casual conversations anymore, because we've now entered an era in which it's no longer reasonable to assume that other people have seen the same things that we have (and vice-versa). Does that make sense? Like, there's just too much viral shit out there to warrant the expectation.

Seriously though, even the mere *storage* of content is effectively meaningless to us at this point, since all of our devices can already hold more photos and videos than we'd ever be able to sort through on our own. It reminds me of a joke from one of Joe Rogan's Netflix specials, namely, that if an Instagram model were to go through her inbox and delete all of the unsolicited dick pics she's received

from random dudes, her phone would become physically lighter in weight afterwards. And speaking of ~~Bro Joegan~~ Joe Rogan, even he churns out an absurd amount of ~~dick picks~~ content via his own podcast/YouTube channel. And ya know what? I decided to run the numbers on it (*using my phone as a calculator, of course*), and here's what I found:

Since Christmas Eve of 2009, Joe Rogan has released a total of 1,250 podcast episodes (ATOW, and including the MMA-related ones) with an average duration of 2 hours and 39 minutes per episode. To put that into perspective, this means that if today were January 1st and you started listening to his podcast literally nonstop from the very beginning, it would be May 18th by the time you caught up to where he is today, and that's assuming he never makes another episode ever again. Assuming he *does*, it would be more like May 24th by the time you were fully up to speed (as long as he keeps up with the more recent pace he's been on over the last few years).

Anyway, despite the fact that Rogan was clearly one of the earliest bigtime adopters of the podcast (which would explain why he's probably a statistical outlier in terms of volume), he's definitely not alone anymore. And believe it or not, since everyone and their grandmother are starting their own podcasts these days, it won't even be long before we reach a million of them in existence—and that's podcasts, *not* podcast episodes. I think that's totally bonkers, but at the same time it also makes a lot of sense, doesn't it? Podcasts are simply the easiest medium for producing the largest amount of content, and we're also living in a time when society is still trying to figure out how much content we *can* consume rather than how much of it we *should*. Thus, at the end of the day, podcasts are merely filling the gaps for whenever we're unable to stare at a screen but still feel like we *have* to spend every waking hour being entertained.

There used to be a show on the Travel Channel called *No Reservations*, and even though I never really watched any of it, my imagination tells me that it was probably the best possible version of what 100 Flights *might have been like* if it were ever turned into a ~~podcast~~ TV show. The host of that show was a chef

named Anthony Bourdain, who sadly killed himself last month (ATOW), however as people often do when a famous person passes away, they started sharing a lot of his most memorable quotes on social media shortly after the news broke. In particular, one of those quotes was this one: "I understand that there's a guy inside of me who wants to lay in bed, smoke weed all day, and watch cartoons and old movies. My whole life is a series of stratagems to avoid and outwit that guy."

Of course, in zero ways would I ever presume that Bourdain's death had anything to do with content consumption related issues, but in a completely separate conversation related to that quote (which clearly resonated with a lot of people), I *would* presume that there's a glaring lack of available resources for individuals who struggle with addictions to content. (Well, apart from pornography I guess, since there's definitely resources for that.) To the best of my knowledge, there's no 'Contents Anonymous' help center/hotline for people who are addicted to platforms like Netflix or YouTube, and there's no international campaign dedicated to educating children and/or adults on how to manage their digital health and wellness either. (To be fair, I'm sure there are *some* outlets out there that I personally don't know about yet, but all that really tells me is that they're still not big enough and/or well-funded enough.) Meanwhile, it's not like the companies that make a killing off people's addictions to their apps and services have any real incentives to do anything beyond the occasional awareness campaign (*such as, I don't know, perhaps deactivating their infinity-scroll and/or autoplay features by default or something*), and you're never going to see them put out honest warning messages like, "Caution: if you post to your daily Instagram story so often that the progress bars at the top of your screen change from dashes to dots (*or if you regularly watch other people's stories that do this*), then you may have a problem that only prayer can solve."

The truth is, the vast majority of these predominately US-based platforms can't even be bothered to do a sensible version of this, and (I know I already mentioned all of this back in Chapter 8, but) that's because they all operate on the good ol' American business model of maximizing profits first and worrying about societal costs second—*that is, unless their profits are already so big that*

they can allocate enough cash-money-honey for political donations and/or lobbying for (or against) legislation that'll allow them to avoid having to address societal costs altogether. Also, for bonus points (and I know I already mentioned this in Chapter 20, but), they may even try to influence public consciousness either by shifting the blame onto regular people (à la the fossil fuel industry's efforts to make climate change seem like it's all our fault for using plastic straws), or by engaging in full-blown racketeering (à la Big Tobacco's well-documented history of knowingly propagating misleading 'scientific studies' in order to claim that cigarettes actually reduced the risk of cancer).

And while we're at it, another ~~excessive tangent~~ practical example of the 'shoot first, ask questions later' model is how the US differs from Europe when it comes to identifying and mitigating the risks associated with harmful chemicals. In the States, for instance, the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA) does not require companies to produce information or run tests on any new chemicals before they are sold in commercial products (such as plastic bottles or personal care products), and companies are only required to provide the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with information about a chemical's impact on the environment and human health if it already exists. In the EU, however, a regulation known as REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) not only requires chemical companies to provide human health and environmental data for both existing and new chemicals (which means they're subject to conducting their own tests in order to gain authorization), but it also requires a wider public disclosure of certain safety-related chemical properties (such as melting/boiling points), in addition to placing greater restrictions on the information that chemical companies are allowed to claim as confidential. Now, all of that being said, I still haven't listened to any podcasts about REACH to get the scoop on how well it's being enforced (or if it has any severely unredeeming qualities), but at least it sounds way better on the surface, seeing as the burden of proof lies with the chemical companies to ensure that whatever they're selling is ultimately *safe*, whereas the US system leaves it up to the woefully underfunded EPA to prove that certain chemicals are *unsafe*. Of course, there's also a stipulation in the TSCA requiring the EPA to prove that the risk of a given chemical goes above and beyond the potential economic consequences that banning it *might* have on the national economy (among other things), which is so utterly American that it almost

makes me proud, lol.

But getting back to how we're all effectively cyborgs already, I think most of the danger associated with both content addiction and technological attachment stems out of the same basic dilemma, which is that we're still just figuring things out as we go (so we can't even tell what is and what isn't quote-unquote "toxic" until we've already had too much of it). At the same time, information itself can be like a drug for those who are naturally curious (aka 'informavores'), and humans have never before been able to look up whatever they want, whenever they want, wherever they are. I'm not even trying to sound super deep here (*or pretend that libraries never existed*) but that's still a potentially slippery slope for a species that barely understands how its own hormones work, isn't it? Granted, it's probably not quite on the same level as the cliché of handing a machine gun to a chimpanzee, but I don't think it's too far off; I mean, if you had a literal endless supply of dopamine at the touch of a button, why *wouldn't* you keep on pressing it? Alternatively, just imagine the reactions you'd get if you handed a modern smartphone to people from 50 years ago and said, "Here: use this to look up information, pictures, and videos on pretty much any topic you can think of, as many times as you want." Don't you think that technology would be *way* more mesmerizing to them than if we had flying cars? Now imagine what it must be like today for children who are born into that reality from day one.

When it comes down to it, younger generations are *not* getting dumber and lazier —in fact, the average IQ of younger generations consistently and almost linearly outperforms that of their older generational counterparts via what is known as the Flynn effect—but they *are* getting more and more overloaded with real-time access to things that are literally designed to capture and hold their attention. Just 20 years ago, for example, it was practically impossible (without a shit ton of effort) to bring your own movie onto an airplane, and now virtually every passenger is capable of binge-watching an entire marathon of movies simultaneously. And speaking of binge-watching, I'm pretty sure that we can already classify the entertainment industry's trend of releasing full seasons of shows all at once as yet another creeping normality, which in this case preys on the kind of people (aka any number of us) who can't help but blast through all of

the episodes in a single weekend.

You know, half of the reason why I started writing on planes last year is because I finally got sick and tired of figuring out what to watch and/or read and/or listen to on all of them—and it *still* took me 35 flights to reach that point. (To be fair, I probably *wasn't* blasting through content on each and every one of those previous 34, but you get what I'm saying.) In any case, just knowing that there's virtually always going to be something entertaining to keep me occupied *at my literal fingertips* is the epitome of temptation, and the devil in me is that there are days that go by where all I do is consume. Of course, that *does* feel bad to some extent, but the problem is, it also feels good. (And meanwhile, you're telling me that I have to compete with *algorithms* to decide what I should do with my idle time? *Shiiiit*, I can't be trusted to do that.)

By the way, regardless of the attack vector that I'm clearly on right now, I wouldn't be caught dead saying that content is inherently bad in and of itself, and that goes for both the consumption and the creation of it. First of all, consuming content is literally how we learn, and there's no alternative way around that (yet). Secondly, creating and sharing content is one of the ways that we connect with other people, and it's also one of the ways that we grow as individuals (or at least it's how we can see some evidence that we *have* grown.) Personally, I can already tell how far I've come just from the early chapters of this book, because when I go back and reread them, all I do is cringe at some of the things I wrote. (I swear, it feels exactly the way I've always imagined Justin Timberlake must feel whenever he sees those old pictures of him and Britney Spears wearing their matching full-denim outfits back in like 2001—*actually I take that back; it's not just Justin Timberlake we're talking about, it's also Britney, bitch*.)

Anyway, the point I'm struggling to make here is that despite how absolutely vital content is to us (both personally and interpersonally), I still gotta believe that there's a big difference between the kind of content that we're genuinely inspired to create/consume and the kind of content that we're merely conditioned

to create/consume due to sheer force of habit—*which I believe I demonstrated in Krakow*. Furthermore, I'm just not so sure about the fairly popular notion that there's some kind of tug-of-war going on between our individual creation and consumption of content (*as if creating more of it were somehow a solution to over consuming*), because we've already shown (and are continuing to show) that we are more than capable of doing both of these things in a less-than-fully-conscious state of mind. This is also why I've most likely been conflating the consumption and the creation of content as being one in the same (because they may each have their own individual tug-of-wars going on in parallel).

It's like, what's the difference between whatever it is that makes a person be able to watch television in the background as they slog through Twitter (or Facebook, or Instagram, or Youtube, or Reddit, etc) on another device, and whatever it is that makes ~~me~~ a person automatically whip out their phone to record a 4-second video of a stranger walking down the street in his underwear (*with no clear intention of ever doing anything with that video*)? The implication here is that there's really no difference at all, and that this gravitational pull applies to both of them independently, even though it produces different results.

Nevertheless, I guess it all comes back to how we can strike an adequate balance (for both of these things) when there are no clear cut guidelines for us to follow (for either one); if there were, then maybe we'd be a bit more serious about things like *not* zombie-scrolling every night before bed, or perhaps I would've *actually* had the willpower *not* to take a picture out of every airplane window I sat next to during my year of a hundred flights. Instead, we carry on like none of these things are a big deal, when in reality (or at least in my experience/observation) we're probably doing the exact same mental gymnastics that people who are *clearly* addicted to cigarettes do whenever they say things like, "I can quit anytime I want." It's like, yes, you *can* go to the bathroom without bringing your phone, but unless you're doing so to prove a point (like that guy from LA who literally married his phone in Las Vegas a few years ago), you'll probably bring it anyway just to get that dopamine you're already so used to getting. (*I wonder if there's a way to make dopamine patches like they have for nicotine.*)

Look, I don't really know what the answer is, but it seems like mindlessness has a lot to do with the question; at the same time, it also seems fairly straightforward that a decrease in mindfulness would almost necessarily be a side-effect of an increase in cyborgization. It's like, shit, we're already so accustomed to consuming things without thinking, that sometimes we'll even consume our *reactions* to those things without thinking as well. Here's a slightly long-winded example of what I mean:

One of my old roommates from California is/was a big fan of European football, and coincidentally his favorite team (Arsenal) happens/happened to be the same as mine. (I was a big fan of Nick Hornby's books as a teenager, so naturally *Fever Pitch* led me to supporting Arsenal just like the author/narrator—*which sort of proves the point I'm trying to make here already, but that's not why I bring it up*.) So my roommate and I would often chat about the club's most recent performances, however we would rarely get to watch any of the matches together because of how early they came on in the Pacific time zone. (E.g., a Saturday fixture at 1 p.m. London time would start at around 5 a.m. for us). As a result, sometimes we would just wake up early and watch the matches in our own respective bedrooms, go back to sleep, and then talk about them later on whenever we were both out and about.

Okay, here's the part where the example makes sense: because at some point down the line, I started noticing that the things he would say to me about the results were oftentimes identical to some of the top comments that I had already seen in the post-match discussion threads on Reddit. (I guess he wasn't aware that I also browsed those posts at the time.) Now, I don't want to put this guy on blast or anything, ~~but I will anyway~~ but the idea that he would form his weekly opinions simply by skimming through the comments, finding one that sounded good, and then palming it off as his own is exactly what I'm suggesting we're all becoming more and more accustomed to doing without even realizing it—and that's the scary part, because it's not that we're *unwilling* to think critically on our own (at least I don't think so), it's that we're seemingly *more* willing to just allow ourselves to be astroturfed or whatever because it's there.

As for myself, I'm sure that I've already regurgitated a gazillion ideas right here in this book that I either heard in a YouTube video, or read online somewhere, or picked up from a friend, and I probably can't even tell how derivative half of them truly are at this point. For instance, way back in Chapter 9, I made a reference to an idea that American elections and/or campaign finances would be a lot more transparent if politicians were required to wear logos of their special interest donors on all of their clothes (like what NASCAR drivers do with their sponsors), and sometime between then and now I discovered that this whole idea was just a ripoff of a line from a decade-old Robin Williams movie and/or stand-up special *that I've never even seen*, so I still have no clue where I picked it up in the first place, let alone how many times it was 're-borrowed' before it got to me. That said, there's a really good historical example related to this that I absolutely have to share now (if only because it's so frickin' meta), and it starts with a quote that goes like this:

"If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism; if you steal from many authors, it's research."

So that's already a pretty good line on its own, right? Well, what makes it even better is the fact that it's also been reused, revamped, and recredited at least 20 or so (noteworthy) times dating all the way back to the year 1820, when Charles Caleb Colton (an English cleric/writer known for his aphorisms) put it this way: "If we steal thoughts from the moderns, it will be cried down as plagiarism; if, from the ancients, it will be cried up as erudition." Of course, I'm not here to speculate about whether or not Triple-C had poached those words from somewhere else himself (*because how the heck would I know?*), but I will point out the fun fact that he also published the line, "Imitation is the sincerest [form] of flattery" in the exact same book—which again, came out in 1820, so I guess Oscar Wilde's extended version of it (i.e., "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery that mediocrity can pay to greatness") was perhaps a remix of C³'s original. Maybe, who knows?

But before I get ahead of myself here, I should probably acknowledge how important it is (and pretty much always has been) for people to take inspiration from others and piggyback off their ideas; I mean, it's not like Albert Einstein should've been the only one who was ever allowed to benefit from and/or expand on his theory of relativity or something. At the same time-space continuum, it's also true that two people can easily come up with the same (far simpler) ideas independently from one another, and given the ludicrous amount of content that the world cranks out these days, people are bound to 'repeat' things (*like what I'm doing with ideas from previous chapters*) now more than ever. Case in point(s): it's already been 15 years since the creators of *South Park* aired an episode in reference to the trope about how every plotline known to man has already been done by *The Simpsons,* and similarly, hasn't the recording industry already produced every single decent sounding chord progression on the guitar as well? (*I don't know shit about music composition, though, so I'm clearly regurgitating again*.)

You know, once I realized that I would eventually be turning 100 Flights into a book, I started to get super self-conscious about the things I was consuming throughout the writing process. Like, I really wanted to make sure that I was creating something in a vacuum, so shortly after I finally finished reading the book *Infinite Jest,* I stopped reading and/or watching anything else that I thought would definitely influence my writing (which is obviously impossible, but what I mean is that I deliberately started to avoid material from all of the sources/authors/artists whom I already knew had inspired me in the past, in addition to avoiding whatever else my gut told me would have the same effect). Hell, I even started a list of things that I'm dying to watch—*but won't until I'm completely done with this project*—and I honestly have no idea if that's a weird thing to be doing or not, but I just didn't want to be producing something that *felt* like it wasn't 100 percent mine, even though I've already demonstrated that it most likely isn't. Does that make sense?

But getting back to how all of this plays into our 'issues' with content, there's one final creeping normality that I want to bring up, which is how we're already so inundated with fake content (including that which we already *know* is fake) that we're also starting to become more comfortable producing (*and/or*

regurgitating) fake shit ourselves. I think the easiest example of this is the whole 'Instagram vs. Reality' situation we have going on (i.e., where Photoshop and beauty filters have become the norm, even for many regular people), because what started out as a simple unfortunate response to the pressures of maintaining flawless online self-images has gotten so out of hand that it's now become a default assumption of ours that everything we see on the internet has already been doctored. Of course, some of this is far more obvious than others (like when people use portrait mode on their selfies at the Grand Canyon, effectively blurring out *the entire fucking Grand Canyon*), but we're also just around the corner from the moment when a tool for creating highly convincing deep-fakes becomes freely accessible to the masses, and we've already scratched the surface of having things like virtually undetectable real-time filters on live video.

Somewhat coincidentally, David Foster Wallace briefly touched on this topic when he was describing the reasons why video-calling never really caught on in the slightly futuristic timeline of his aforementioned novel, *Infinite Jest*: because people didn't like the idea of having to make themselves presentable and/or attractive at a moment's notice, so the phone companies responded by developing digital tools for customers to enhance their appearances and ultimately make them look better than they ever would naturally. *Sound familiar?* (Keep in mind that this book came out in 1996, so it's kinda interesting how DFW's prediction was that the network providers were going to be responsible for this technology rather than the *not-yet-existing* social media platforms.)

As time went on, however, this 'High Definition Photographic Imaging' feature led people to start using all kinds of masks and/or mannequins to sit in for them during their calls, and eventually 'video-telephoning' itself became an activity where everyone would simply be watching each other's mannequins, without ever revealing their own faces. Of course, shortly thereafter, an 'enormous psychosocial stress' began to build as the vast majority of users suddenly became reluctant to leave the house for in-person encounters due to the fear that the people they met would be disappointed by their real, unmasked appearance.

Now, I'm not here to suggest that it's only a matter of ~~catfish~~ time before this whole situation happens to us, but it *does* seem like we're at least on a trajectory where it would be possible; at the same time, though, I'm also not here to be some high and mighty big-brain who thinks we should all go live on a farm or something either, so I don't know what to tell ya. I guess it's just a really strange time for us to be figuring out all of this stuff on the fly, and I feel like it's especially unusual for millennials (who are now starting to raise kids of their own), since millenials are the *only* generation that straddled what it was like to grow up *both before and with* the internet. For instance, I'm pretty sure that I was among the very last group of high school students to ~~beat teen pregnancy~~ graduate before smartphones became a thing (seeing as the very first iPhone was released less than a year prior), and when you compare that to my three-month-old nephew (ATOW), he's already had a phone held up to his face more times than he's had poop in his diaper. Also, fun fact: apparently babies can now tell the difference between live video-calls and those live-action TV shows for kids (*i.e., the kind where characters will look at the camera and pretend to interact with the child*) as early as six months old. Unfortunately, however, it remains to be seen at what age their 'enormous psychosocial stress' starts to develop.

Jokes aside, that stuff kinda does freak me out, but again, it's mostly because I still feel like we haven't even figured out the best practices for adults yet, let alone for all of the babies who will grow up to discover that they'll be able to see roughly a hundred photos of themselves from literally any day since they were born. And that's not me being a hater or anything (because I would obviously be doing the same thing if I were a parent), but it's just that this is where we are right now in terms of society's demand for content, even if we don't share it. (Have you ever heard of the acronym CREAM? It stands for ~~Cash~~ Content Rules Everything Around Me.)

So at the end of the day, it's no wonder we're all so desensitized to fake stuff these days, because perhaps it's less about being mindless, or unoriginal, or uninspired, or narcissistic, or self-interested, and more about being so damn worn out by all of the technology encouraging us to consume/create more that it's just easier to ride the wave at this point. It reminds me of what Bo Burnham had to say at the end of his *Make Happy* Netflix special (right before his insanely

good parody of a Kanye West-like song/rant): "They say it's like, the 'Me' generation. It's not. The arrogance was taught, or it was cultivated […] It's just the market's answer to a generation that demanded to perform, so the market said, 'Here, perform. Perform everything to each other, all the time, for no reason.' It's prison, it's horrific."

So I dunno, maybe the Contents Anonymous thing isn't so bad of an idea after all. In fact, maybe it's even a million dollar idea, and maybe a few crafty assholes have already worked out how to maximize its profits while ignoring the societal costs. (*Wouldn't that be something special?*) Better yet, how about those dopamine patches? I think that idea is almost as good as the one I had when I decided to call this chapter 'Content Generation' (which I'm actually kinda proud of), because not only will the people who think it's a reference to the literal creation (aka 'generation') of content be right about it, but so will the people who think it's about the era and/or age bracket (aka 'generation') of content—and although some people will have probably picked up on that double-meaning before I pointed it out just now, I'm not sure if anyone will have considered that I might also be playing with the *other* meaning of the word 'content' as well, like, are you feeling *content* right now? In other words, are you *content* with my content generation?

Good god, I hope so.

…

I wrote this on flights from Katowice to Warsaw, 26 July 2018, and Warsaw to Vilnius, 29 July 2018. (I also broke the rules and pre-wrote a shit ton of it by hand with a regular-ass pen and a pad of paper on a bus from Krakow to Katowice, 26 July 2018, but I figured that was allowed this time given the whole no-phone thing.)

XXX

Chapter 23: Tree Fiddy and Me

So it's officially been four days since the de facto closure of my yearlong window for a hundred flights, and naturally I'm still flying around doing victory laps. *Screw it, why not*?

But while I can pretend to be all insouciant about things now (*that's a new big word I'm trying out for the first time, btw*), the truth is, I'm only on a plane right now because of the contingency plan I made roughly a month ago when I was frantically mapping out my final two weeks and ultimately booked a dozen flights in a span of 60 hours.[1] What that plan included, of course, was an extra pair of ~~underwear~~ flights in case anything went tits up down the stretch (such as if I missed the first leg of a roundtrip to Athens), but seeing as everything ultimately worked out (*in a manner of speaking*), it was merely icing on the cake when I reached my magic number and still had a pair flights to Krakow and Warsaw in my back pocket. Now, as fate would have it, I ended up abandoning that first flight from Berlin to Krakow when I superseded it with a flight to Paris instead, but seeing as I still managed to hop on a one-way to Krakow (from Paris) roughly a day and a half before that other flight to Warsaw anyway, that left me with a grand total of 103 flights by the time it was all said and done. Call me an overachiever.

But regardless of however many bonus points I racked up along the way, *as long as I didn't ~~shit my pants~~ trip at the finish line*, the storybook ending that I had written for myself a month in advance remained the same: my 365-day stretch would be complete, and the next thing I'd be doing is getting on a flight headed straight for Vilnius, Lithuania.

Not exactly what you were expecting, was it? Like, why not go home to Berlin or something?

Well, despite how eager I am to be taking a break from traveling, one of the things that I was afraid of (back when I was booking the grand finale of flights) was how I still had absolutely no idea what I'd be doing with myself once it was all over; I mean, I essentially left my job to pursue the rest of this pet project (or whatever you want to call it), so it's only natural that I'd be feeling a bit lost without it, right? That said, because I *kinda maybe sorta* sensed all of this coming ahead of time, I decided that the best and/or most comfortable way for me to deal with all of that…would be to circumvent it entirely by continuing to travel instead. *Screw it, why not*?

So that's what I did, and today I'm on my 24th flight in the last 44 days whether or not I truly wanted to be, or if I'm simply doing so out of habit, or passion, or fear, or because of an imaginary prerequisite condition where I must be on a plane in order to keep writing like this, or perhaps because of something even more melodramatic that I'm finally ready to unravel. (*Uh oh*.) But before I get all sidetracked and "in my feelings" like Drake and Kiki, I guess I should probably spill the beans as to why I thought it was so apropos for me to have gone to Lithuania.

So the somewhat missing link here is the somewhat fun fact that a major branch of my personal ancestry comes from Lithuania, yet nobody else in my immediate family tree has ever been there, nor have we ever really known much about our Lithuanian heritage in the first place (apart from its supposed existence) due to a falling out that happened three or so generations back. Roughly a year and a half ago, however, all of that ever-so-slightly changed when I decided to take one of those DNA tests to find out if I had any ~~bastard children~~ elevated risks for developing a number of genetically inheritable (or whatever the proper jargon is) health problems and/or diseases. Now, apart from the good news that my health report came back squeaky clean (*thanks for asking*), you've probably already guessed that the test I took also came back with a report on my autosomal DNA ancestry, because yeah, it was one of those.

Unsurprisingly, this report indicated an extreme likelihood (*so basically a confirmation*) that I have one or more direct-line ancestors who descended from a single population in Lithuania—which, first of all, is pretty mind-blowy if you ask me considering all I did was hock a loogie into a tube and mail it off somewhere (so it's not like I gave them any 'wishful' information just so they could turn around and fudge the truth like some phony-baloney horoscope or something).[2] And second of all, it gets even better, because my ancestry report also revealed that I happen to share the same haplogroup as Gediminas (aka the ancient Duke of Lithuania), so clearly I'm royal as fucking fuck.

Full disclosure: I still don't know what a haplogroup is exactly, but that's something for the common folk to worry about, not a nobleman like me.

Anyhow, due to the happenstantial fact that anything and everything my family *might* have known regarding our ancestors (such as their historical whereabouts, or even just their original namesake) had either been lost over time or changed during immigration, there was nothing in particular that I was hoping to uncover while I was in Vilnius; I just went there to hang out and see what it looked like. Nevertheless, I *did* happen to pay a visit to the national museum where I spent one half of my time reading about the country's history and the other half inspecting the portraits on the walls to see if any of them looked like me (*because you gotta*). And although this turned out to be remarkably ineffective, I at least managed to deduce that the first two-thirds of my own present-day (and therefore completely irrelevant) name would have probably resembled something like *Džonas* (aka Jonas aka John aka Ian) *Jokūbas* (aka Jakob aka Jacob) in Lithuanian years past, and *that* could only mean one thing—which is that *if* I'm not already halfway related to John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt, well, then I must be a full-blown reincarnation of the mythical man himself. (I mean, it's *right there* in the lyrics that "His name is my name too," and I don't need no Jingleheimin' ancestry report to tell me that.)

I had a really nice time exploring the rest of Vilnius, by the way; it had a classic Baltic vibe to it, there was a big river with my favorite ducks all around it, and

even the ladies that I saw in town (*some of whom I actually spoke to, believe it or not*) seemed extra ~~attracted~~ attractive to me in the most non-Alabaman way I could ever say that.[3] Seriously though, it was just really nice to get a glimpse of the country for myself finally, and I also picked a really good time for it because (*let's face it*) I'm not gonna pretend that this whole thing *wasn't* just an excuse for me to go soul-searching and reflect on my big year now that it was finally over.

Do you remember back in Chapter 20 when I mentioned the whole "what does it all mean" phase of 100 Flights? Yeah, well, this is why I wanted to wait a bit before digging into that, because I knew that this trip was just around the corner. In fact, having specifically chosen to visit Lithuania a full month in advance, I'm actually impressed that I had the foresight to see it coming. Of course, there was never anything tangible for me to find in my pseudo-homeland of Lithuania anyway, but I at least found a slick way of dodging the somewhat ironic 'lost' feeling of *not* traveling for a few more days. And sure, perhaps I even managed to feel a completely placebic sense of 'home' while I was there, but it's not like I would go sit down in public restrooms without taking the necessary sanitary measures to prepare the toilet seats beforehand due to some strangely overwhelming sensation that hygiene didn't matter to me anymore because "*these are my people*" or something.[4]

Now, having said all of that, was it still cheesy for me to go to Lithuania just to walk around aimlessly and think about whether or not this place were responsible for some of my goofiest characteristics—like how I literally cannot rest sunglasses on the top of my head for two minutes without them falling down onto my nose (or behind my head and onto the floor), or how I always get super dizzy every time I try to stay upside-down when I'm underwater, or how I'm straight up incapable of eating soup and/or cereal without at least one spoonful dribbling down my chin *even when I really set my mind on avoiding it*? Yes, it absolutely *was* cheesy for me to do all of that… but do you know what else is even cheesier? The fact that this chapter ended up being chapter number 23, which I totally did on purpose.[5]

But besides the cheese, I think the bigger (and far more appealing) story here is the fact that the overall genetic data behind all of those DNA tests is becoming so refined and so widely available that regular people like me are able to see how it plays into the age-old rivalry between nature and nurture. For example, despite how I was already impressed by the test's ability to predict some of my attributes that I already knew about, such as the approximate shade of my eye color or the fact that I prefer salty snacks to sweet ones, I found it to be really mind-blowy when it predicted a handful of other things that I didn't (or perhaps couldn't) know about myself on my own, like how I'm unable to detect certain bitter elements in certain foods, or that I shouldn't expect to be going bald any time soon.[6] Of course, all of these 'advanced' data points are still just predictive values for the time being, but the cool part is how they're becoming more and more reliable the more data that gets collected—*which is kinda the whole point of big data in the first place, right*?

But it's not just genetic big data that's becoming more sophisticated these days. Before I left my job in Berlin a few months ago, for instance, there was a day when we had everyone in the office participate in a company-wide culture evaluation thingy by some new-ish startup that had been endorsed by a professor of organizational behavior at Stanford (which was good enough for me because #fearthetree). Anyway, the point of this evaluation was to assess how each of our employees fared in the company's unique working environment by leveraging big data against our private survey responses to generate individually tailored reports for each person. (It also generated a report for the company as a whole, but only those of us at the top of the food chain got to see that one, since it was super easy to identify who it thought some of our weakest links were.)

Side note: I get that this sounds *exactly* like a workplace horoscope or something (*so therefore it's difficult to care even the slightest bit about it*), but dammit, just bear with me because ~~I need a segue for later~~ it also includes some of my juicier weaknesses, so I'm not just going to be jerking myself around with the good parts… I'll be doing *other* things as well.

Alright, so apart from the more vaporous workplace characteristics I was given (e.g., "notices small errors and delivers polished work," "trustworthy and authentic," "pays close attention to data," and "may perform poorly in high-pressure situations"),[7] the overall upshot of my report was that although I'm detail-oriented and I have high ethical work standards and I'm generally willing to take risks on new opportunities/experiences, I'm also likely to work slowly due to placing more of an emphasis on delivering quality rather than focusing on achieving results, and I may have difficulty finishing projects as a further result of that.

Okay, great, but so what?

Well, first things first, according to the Barnum Effect (aka our tendency to accept things such as horoscopes and/or character assessments to be true even when the information is too vague *not* to be worthless), I'm now compelled to say that all of those descriptions were surprisingly accurate. Next, I'll then go on to defend that this particular evaluation's methodology is clearly more robust and/or legitimate than all of its predecessors (meaning that *this* is the one which we can actually trust), and that's great because now I finally have some cold, hard evidence as to why I can never get anything d—

No, seriously, I really do have trouble finishing projects sometimes (which does not bode well for this book), but the part where this might actually be interesting (*fingers crossed*) is when you compare all of those findings to a completely separate set of results I obtained via IBM Watson's Personality Insights service, which is a linguistic analytics program that takes large chunks of a person's writing and then generates data-driven predictions of their strongest values and characteristics across 52 different personality-related attributes. Naturally, since I'm not exactly short on written ammo these days, I went ahead and ran several of my latest reasonably-sized chapters through the analysis. Of course, I immediately got carried away, then one thing led to another, and the next thing I knew, I had already compiled an aggregate of Watson's most consistent findings. (*Again, just bear with me here please, because I swear there's a ~~segue~~*

point to all of this.)

- You are genial, expressive, and you think it is important to take care of the people around you.
- You are confident; you are hard to embarrass, and are self-confident most of the time.
- You are self-controlled; you have control over your desires, which are not particularly intense.
- You are empathetic; you feel what others feel and are compassionate towards them.
- You consider both independence and helping others to guide a large part of what you do.

Oh fuck, wait a second, that was an analysis of former US President Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.[8] Sorry about that.

Anyway, here's what Watson had to say about my writing and me:

- You are inner-directed, critical, and can often be perceived as insensitive.
- You are philosophical; you are open to and intrigued by exploring new ideas.
- You have a strong desire to have time to yourself.
- You are relatively unconcerned with tradition; you care more about making your own path than following what others have done.
- You don't find achievement or success to be particularly motivating for you; instead, your choices are driven by a desire to seek out ~~attention~~ experiences that provide a strong feeling of discovery.

Okay, so what's the verdict now? Accurate? Inaccurate? Too "horoscopic" to tell?

Truth be told, I'm probably sitting too close to the screen to be able to see the big picture for myself, but what stood out to me the most (*apart from how Watson wasted virtually no time at all before calling ~~the kettle black~~ me insensitive*) was the part about how I'm not particularly motivated by achievement—and that's not because I disagree with it or whatever (*since I'm obviously predisposed to agreeing with all of it*), it's just that I don't think anyone or any-*thing* has ever told me that before, yet suddenly there were two completely unrelated sources of 'big data' that were both sort of telling it to me at the same time. (Because one of them said that I don't focus on achievement while the other one said that I'm not motivated by it, and to me that sounds like two sides of the same coin.)

So evidently all of this was painstakingly fascinating to me (seeing as I pay such "CloSE aTTeNtiOn TO dAta"), but just to be sure that I wasn't about to drive myself off a cliff in a clown car of confirmation bias, I decided to see what would happen if I ran a couple chapters of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *The Count of Monte Cristo* through the analysis as well. And despite how there *were* in fact *some* dubiously overlapping similarities to the results, sure enough, when it came to describing our respective motivations, Watson forked; more specifically, at the part where he said that I would seek out experiences that provide a strong feeling of *discovery*, he said that Lewis Carroll would seek out *belongingness*, and that Alexandre Dumas would seek out *organization*.[9]

Speaking of organization (or a lack thereof), I think it's time we looped back around to the existential unraveling of a lost boy in Lithuania. (*That's right, fuck those world-renowned writers. It's time for more me*.)

…

You know, one of the gloomier things that's been bouncing around in my head lately is this recurring thought that the more time I spend trying to adapt myself and relate to people in other countries, the more I may be turning myself into

someone who can't. (Just hear me out with this one.) It's like, we only have a certain amount of available bandwidth, so if you continue to make drastic changes in terms of where you live, then at some point you're eventually going to find yourself caught in a limbo of *not yet* relating to the people in your new surroundings, and *no longer* relating to the people from your old ones. I'm not sure if I'm articulating this well enough for it to sound like it should ever matter, but it's just a weird thing to experience, and I never really get to talk about it in real life because I simply don't know very many people who have also moved to a new country and/or continent multiple times—and I hate how stand-offish and/or 'gatekeepy' that sounds, but I honestly *don't* know a lot of people who have done that, and it's not exactly an easy thing to relate to in my opinion. (An easy thing to relate to in my opinion would be the experience of trying to plug in a USB that doesn't seem to fit on the first try, then flipping it over only to discover that the first way you had it was correct.)

I've actually tried having conversations about this with some old friends recently, and they've been particularly challenging, especially the ones that were with people who have lived in the same general area since the time we and/or they graduated from college, because many of them have expressed their remorse to me about "playing it safe" or whatever. I kinda hate those conversations because the *instant* they start to suggest having some envy of my "big fancy adventurous lifestyle" in any way, I'm so ~~obnoxious~~ fast to point out just how reciprocal my envy is of theirs. At the end of the day, I feel like it comes down to two options: you can either choose freedom and want structure, or you can choose structure and want freedom. And I don't know if there's truly a sustainable balancing act for that, because having enough of one almost always seems to mean not having enough of the other; they're just two opposite ends of the same spectrum, so all we're ultimately doing is calling the other grass greener.

It's kind of the same thing when it comes to the concepts of discovery and home, because they both provide a sense of comfort in their own separate ways, but for totally complementary reasons. I think *that's* why Vilnius was the perfect place for me to go quote-unquote "soul-searching" this week, because I got to experience the excitement of exploring somewhere new juxtaposed with the

comfort of somehow feeling connected as well. For a short while I got the best of both worlds, and it came at a time when I *kinda maybe sorta* needed it.

Anyway, I think I was just starting to scratch the surface of this 'adapting and relating' stuff all the way back in Chapter 9 (when I had just realized that my 'home' continent was the one in which I'd spent the third most amount of time over the previous five years), but since then it's become a lot more clear, especially after my latest trip to the States. It's just that I've finally been able to wrap my head around the fact that my quote-unquote "new normal" is now to visit the US as an expat/immigrant, so as backwards as it sounds, I've actually started to *feel* like I'm a foreigner whenever I do. *Does that make sense?* If so, great, but here's a fun fact that I've been wanting to talk about either way:

In French, the word *dépayser* is a verb that typically gets translated as "to disorient" in English, however since the French word for 'country' is *pays*, a more literal translation of *dépayser* would be something like "to decountrify," as in, "to take someone or something out of their country" (or rather, "to take the country out of them"). In a similar fashion, the derivative word *dépaysement* (aka 'decountrification') is usually translated as "a change of scenery" in English, but in French it often refers to the conscious and perhaps uncomfortable feeling of being in a foreign place.[10] Now, unlike the feeling of *mal du pays* (aka homesickness), which is almost exclusively understood to be a negative thing, *dépaysement* is a feeling that can be either be negative or positive depending on the situation and/or the person—because for some people it can be intimidating (and perhaps lead to culture shock), while for others it can be exhilarating (and perhaps lead to taking a hundred flights in a year). Having said that, even though I don't ~~actually~~ currently think of myself as a foreigner to the US (because, *come on*, even ten years might be too soon for that), I *have* started to feel more and more 'decountrified' (for better or for worse) whenever I'm there, and that kinda freaks me out, since it's not like I feel 'countrified' when I'm anywhere else these days, except for maybe when I'm on an airplane. [*Insert the Anakin Skywalker "What have I done?" meme here.*]

But before I accidentally ~~bring unbalance to the force~~ give another wangsty lecture on what it's like to give up belongingness (*à la* Chapter 9 again), I think I can finally take a stab at the whole "what does it all mean" thing for 100 Flights now, since I probably went to Lithuania for the exact same reason I kept going everywhere else: because deep down I knew that as soon as I was finally done traveling, I'd no longer be able to distract myself from the same damn late-20s cliché about "life goals and just what the hell I'm doing with myself" that I first brought up all the way back in Chapter 2. I mean, that's *gotta* be what this entire pet project (or whatever you want to call it) has been about, right? The only difference is that I've been dressing it up in various disguises and putting it on life-support for six months—*which is crazy because surely I'm not the type of person who drags something out instead of finishes it, am I?* (Watson just exploded.)

And not that anyone asked, but my general take on the quarter-life crisis is that it's just what happens when your very first set of long-term goals suddenly begins to shift into a set of short-term goals (i.e., according to whenever they were all "supposed" to happen), and somehow this catches you both off-guard *and* all at once. It's like, regardless of whether or not these goals ever had any true deadlines, they never really stopped you from living your life as if you had nothing to lose (which was/is mostly true), but then out of nowhere you start to get the feeling that maybe *time* is something that you might have to lose, and also that you might even be losing some of that time already.[11] What comes next, of course, is that you then have to face an entire gauntlet of dread-inducing intrapersonal questions (*which you just can't help but ask yourself*), such as the following:

"Have I been taking my bigger life goals seriously enough?"

"Is it time for me to solidify (or dramatically change) my career path?"

"Am I going to live in this city for the rest of my life?"

"Do I have to rush things if I want to start having kids by the time I always *assumed* I would?"

"Why don't I have a dog yet?"

"How late is too late to join the circus?"

and

"Dammit, why didn't I buy those fucking Bitcoins when I had the chance?"

Now, as fair or as unfair as some of those may be, the questions themselves are not what causes the crisis; instead, it's the tidal wave of imaginary pressure that we suddenly put on ourselves not only to answer the questions quickly, but also to answer them both "correctly" *and* all at once. It's as if life were some big-ass game of Jenga, and now we're finally at the point where we need to start taking blocks away from the bottom or else we'll never reach our goals of becoming a dad and raising a family—*or is that one just me*? (To be fair, though, it's not like becoming a dad is a goal that someone can wake up in the morning and *reasonably* work towards, because if it were, then I'd probably have a poster on my wall that said something like, "Rise and shine, let's get this ~~bread~~ son or daughter.")

On that note, I wanna jump back to the goals and motivations stuff for a second, and that's because of another very interesting word I've come across recently: *velleity*. This is a Latin-based term that's closely related to volition, and it refers

to the lowest degree that a person can want something. In other words, it's when we want something, but we don't quite want it enough to ever go and get it; it's just a wish that we never do anything to fulfill, or a dream that we never even attempt to make come true.

I don't really have a follow-up to that, I just think that it's a fascinating concept to have in mind when it comes to our ambitions (or lack thereof) and the things we ultimately decide to pursue. And if I can also jump back to ~~me me me~~ Watson's assessments for assesscond [*sic*], even though my apparent disregard for achievement came across as a bit of a surprise to me, my "desire to seek out experiences that provide a strong feeling of discovery" certainly did not—*and it doesn't take a supercomputer to figure that out when you consider what I've been up to for the last 12 months*.

Today, however, I'm just not sure if basing my upcoming decisions on discovery is the right call this time, since it would seem kinda antithetical if I were to continue to focus on discovery while all of my cliché "quarter-life crisis" goals are slapping me in the face. That said, I still firmly believe that it would have been a crime against my twenties if I had done anything differently up until this point, but that doesn't change how I'm starting to feel like I was committing preemptive crimes against my thirties either way.

So as I was alluding to earlier, my biggest concern at the moment is figuring out what to do with myself now that my big year is finally over. For starters, I definitely won't be traveling like a maniac anymore, so I'll probably be shocked by all of my new free time and sudden lack of content-gathering opportunities. [12] More importantly, however, the end of this project is also starting to feel like it's the end of my time in Berlin as well. (Because, I dunno, maybe I'm all 'discoveried' out or something.)

But if that's true, and if I do end up leaving Germany before my visa expires, then I guess that means I'll also have to decide what I'm going to do in terms of

getting a new job and perhaps moving to yet another new country—*which is totally fine given my track record and everything, but that's not really the issue here.* Again, it's not so much the *making* of these decisions that's troublesome, it's how their timing happens to coincide with the extra heavy (albeit artificial) pressure to be making the *right* decisions *this* time, and that's not exactly the cushiest position for a late 20s cosmopolite who "may perform poorly in high-pressure situations" to be in, lol. So at the end of the day, instead of feeling like I'm casually ordering something to eat at a food truck that only serves one or two items, it feels more like I'm being rushed to make a decision while staring down the menu at the goddamn Cheesecake Factory, and that thing is like a fucking phonebook.

But whatever, I'll figure it out.

And truth be told, I think I've already had it figured out for a while now (like, even before I booked my trip to Lithuania), but in order for me to make good on my word about doing the whole "what does it all mean" thing, I needed to come up with *something* to write about, didn't I? And that's not to say that there wasn't any truth to all of this (*because there absolutely was*), it's just that the answer to my "Should I stay or should I go" question was always fairly obvious. I mean, just sitting around and thinking about this stuff would never do a person like me any good, and the only way I'm ever going to find out where (and perhaps with whom) I want to end up is if I keep on going to places until I do. After all, it's not like I can look up to the sky and get answers from the stars or anything.

Fucking zodiac signs, am I right?

…

I wrote this on flights from Vilnius to Berlin (31 July 2018), Berlin to Ljubljana (14 August 2018), and Ljubljana to Berlin (16 August 2018).

xxx

1. For a grand total of €332, mind you. What a time to be alive *and* broke *and* traveling Europe, am I right? ↑

2. And just so we're clear, aren't horoscopes just an excuse for people to pretend that something else has control over their lives? I'm not trying to be a dick for no reason here (because I think it's totally fair to enjoy random little motivational messages for the hell of it), but I once dated a girl who told me that her mom straight up refused to hire people at her business if she found out that they were a Scorpio or a Libra, and that's *not* a joke. A joke would be like the meme where a girl asks a guy, 'Hey, what's your sign?' and he says 'Dinosaur,' to which she replies, 'But that one doesn't exist,' to which *he* replies, 'None of them exist.' Anyway, before I stopped seeing that girl for obvious 'like-mother-like-daughter' reasons, I asked her mom if she ever considered changing her sign from Capricorn to Cancer, since that's what she was…a cancer. (That was another joke, btw. I never actually met her mom. She's probably a lovely lady, *minus the whole zodiacal discrimination thing.*) ↑

3. I'm not exactly sure why I decided to say that in the first place, since it's not like I'm truly Lithuanian anyway, but even then, why would that stop me from thinking the women there were hot? I don't know, I guess I just thought it sounded like I was saying my great-grandmother was a total babe or something—*which she totally was. (Or at least I assume she was, but that information got lost in time as well.)* ↑

4. Once again, I'm not sure why I went with such a strange analogy there (especially because I would never do that sort of thing in a public restroom no matter what country I was in), but I'm sticking with it. ↑

5. *Get it? Because of 23andMe?!?* I hope you can appreciate that. Also, if anyone from 23andMe happens to have the good sense of sending me some retroactive sponsorship skrilla for my trouble, *I'm gonna need at least tree fiddy to cover my last thirteen or so flights.* ↑

6. Which, first of all, is great news considering how much time I devoted to my hair back in Chapter 12, but second of all, it leads me to a larger critique that I have regarding the way 23andMe reveals its test results. (Or at least how they were released to me a year and a half ago.) In general, when

you're about to view the report on your potential health risks for the very first time, you have to pass through a dead-serious warning dialogue to verify that you truly wish to know your results, as it may be panic-inducing for some people to find out if they're carriers of genetic variants linked to certain diseases. With that in mind, I simply cannot believe that you *don't* have to bypass a similar dialogue before accessing the results on early hair loss. I mean, *fuck,* maybe I needed a moment to collect myself or something first, people. Then again, I *guess* my hair would have already started falling out if the results were the other way around, but holy shit. ↑

7. *I swear, it happens to lots of guys.* ↑

8. *Lol, please tell me you knew something was off right away. I mean, self-confident and hard to embarrass? Come on, there's no way that was for me.* ↑

9. And that President Lincoln would seek *connectedness*. ↑

10. For those keeping score at home, yes, I do believe that this ~~begs~~ raises the question about *dépaysement* being an untranslatable word—and I deliberately left it out of Chapter 21 because I thought it'd be cute if I saved it for later. ↑

11. Another (debatably) untranslatable word I was saving for later is the German term, *Torschlusspanik* (aka "gate-close-panic"), which is the highly relatable fear that time is running out regarding a specific opportunity or life goal. The most commonly cited example of this is when the unstoppable march of time rears its ugly head at a woman who desires to have biological children before reaching the end of her ovarian reserve. ↑

12. That was supposed to be a joke, but it came out a little too on-the-nose for me to feel like it landed on its own. ↑

Chapter 24: Mystery Rant Casserole

So I've started telling a handful of friends and old coworkers that I'm most likely going to be leaving Berlin pretty soon, and I can't help but feel a little misunderstood by how many of them have assumed that I must be moving back to the States.

First things first, I obviously have no idea where I'm going yet (since that's kind of my *thing*, so I'm like, "Do these people even know me at all?"), and second things second, even if I *were* to move quote-unquote "back" someplace, wouldn't that place technically be Brazil? (I feel like it would.) But above all else, I'm also right on the cusp of being able to start telling people that I've been an expat/immigrant for five full years now (rather than always rounding up), so I really don't think I would take that away from myself for whatever stupid and/or self-righteous reasons make it so important to me. Honestly, it's probably a good thing that I don't take that away from myself either way, because assuming I did move back to the States, you just know I'd immediately turn into one of those jerkoffs who finds a way of saying, "*Well, back when I was ~~seeking validation~~ living abroad...*" in the middle of every conversation, and that's clearly a lose-lose situation for everybody.

Anyway, now that I've really cooled my jets and stopped flying around so much, I think it's clear that this project is finally coming to an end—or maybe I've just run out of things to complain about. (*Yeah, no, that's bullshit.*) Granted, the vast majority of what I've been writing on these aircrafts has been cranked up for the entertainment value, but if there's anything I've learned after 23 chapters of coming up with strawman arguments, it's that I still waste a lot of my real-life energy climbing up tiny useless hills to die on. Nevertheless, I think we can all get better at choosing our own non-fictional battles, but seeing as this feels like one of my last opportunities to say my peace about some things, I thought it might be fun to purge whatever lasting observations I had left. That said, since I've already started to wonder what things *would* be like if I ever returned to the

States (in terms of what I've gotten used to doing and/or having abroad), I thought I'd begin with some of the things that I might actually have missed and see what kind of tangents we can get into from there. After all, despite how much I know I've changed since I left the US (in addition to how uncertain I'd feel about myself if I were living there somewhat permanently again), there are still some things I'd happily welcome back into my life, like how water is free at virtually every American restaurant and you don't have to feel ashamed by asking a waiter for pitchers from the tap.

Honestly, water itself is kind of a big deal, and there are a lot of things that are nice about it in the States (minus the whole Michigan thing). For example, in many less-than-fully-developed countries it's really problematic if everybody flushes their toilet paper (which they instead have to toss into *hopefully covered* trash bins next to the toilet), but in the US it feels like you can pretty much flush whatever you want whenever you want with full industrial-powered impunity— except for quote-unquote "flushable" wipes, of course, because only in America is it legal to call them that. (That's not true.) Also, the personal and/or environmental responsibility of flushing random shit down the toilet is a different discussion entirely, and I'm not suggesting that I flush things which shouldn't be flushed, but whatever.

Another aquatic marvel about the States is that you almost never have to hesitate before drinking the tap water, whereas in many other countries you have to be careful about catching (and then suffering through) Montezuma's revenge. On the flipside, pretty much every time I go back to the US, I find myself comfortable enough to drink the water from the showerheads if I want to. Like, that's actually something I've noticed that I allow myself to do in the States, but never anywhere else. And I think that's weird.

The last thing I want to say about water is that I haven't lived in an apartment with a dishwasher (or a clothes dryer for that matter) since I left the States, so I'd probably look forward to having one of those again. I mean, apart from the convenience, I'm pretty sure that dishwashers save tons of water compared to

hand-washing (that is, unless Big Dishwasher has been lying to us all these years). Nevertheless, I'm clearly overlooking the fact that dishwashers also exist all over the world, so I guess this was only relevant to my own arbitrary living situations abroad, which makes this entire thing moot.

Anyway, yeah, I guess there aren't that many uniquely American things that I truly miss (besides ~~flushing things down~~ blowing things up on the Fourth of July) because all I can seem to come up with are really small things that hardly even count. Like, I miss bar trivia nights, because those are fun (but they're not impossible to find abroad), and I also miss Halloween parties, because those are sweet too (but you can still find those in other countries as well). I do agree with a common consensus that customer service as a general category is pretty stellar in the US, but that also comes with the caveat that a shit ton of American customer service departments are outsourced to other countries.

Some other conveniences I've missed that are perhaps a bit more significant are that free shipping has already been the norm in the States for a number of years (and people like me have been conditioned by ~~Voldemort~~ Jeff Bezos and ~~Azkaban~~ Amazon to never pay for shipping regardless of whether or not the cost is already baked into the price of the product), and thankfully you almost never have to pay with cash in the States no matter where you go. I literally cannot remember the last time I took out money from an American ATM, and it warms my heart to see storefronts with signs that say they don't accept cash.

This is probably getting boring already so I'll only point out three more: One, I think it's really unhelpful that so many European grocery stores are closed on Sundays, so that's something the US has going for it; two, I also (perhaps stereotypically) think that a lot of the hamburgers I've had abroad have sucked, so I don't order them anymore; and three, I *know* that both America's and Mexico's version of Mexican food is pretty fucking hard to beat.

Alright, I think it's clear that most of these things are fairly trivial and altogether

bearable to live without, so now I want to turn to my list of things from abroad that I would have a hard time giving up. This should be much better.

First up, public transportation and high speed rails. I fucking love not needing a car to get around in my daily life, but unfortunately Big Automotive and Big Oil kinda killed that possibility in the US when they weasled their way into dominating American infrastructure back in the day (and got convicted of conspiring to monopolize in 1949, only to face no real punishment). As a result, highways still cut through virtually every major part of America, there are more registered motor vehicles in the state of California than there are licensed drivers, and unless you live in Chicago or New York (and maybe like three other cities) you probably need a car just to buy groceries. Meanwhile, the only time I've ever felt like I needed a car while living abroad was that one time I moved apartments and would've loved to make a run to Ikea.

Another thing that would suck about moving back to the US is having to return to the old-ass way of signing credit card receipts when paying for practically anything. That's such a useless timewaster, and it gets even worse when you tack on the American way of adding tips on top of regular bills at restaurants and stuff. Practically everywhere else you go, it's just, "Please charge my card X total amount, thank you, how ya doing, keep it moving." I also think it's stupid that it took years until I was able to use my American card with the contactless and/or tap payment method, seeing as I was able to use it abroad since the day I got it.

This next one is a small one, but I would also miss living in a place where there aren't very many open container (aka open alcoholic beverage) restrictions, because why shouldn't I be able to walk to my buddy's place while drinking a beer? (*Oh yeah, because walking is out of the question since I need a car.*) Also, a fun fact about Brazil is that you can legally be chugging alcohol while sitting shotgun in a car if you wanted, however there's a zero-point-zero tolerance policy for the driver. (I'm not saying any of this stuff is incapable of being abused, but it's having the freedom that counts, especially when I'm drawing

comparisons with the land of the free.)

This one's probably even smaller than the last one, but I kinda like being adapted to the 24-hour clock (aka military time) that many places use as opposed to the 12-hour AM and PM schedules. On the whole, it really doesn't change much, save for the occasional disambiguation, but what's fascinating to me about it is how my brain has handled it over the last few years. Like, in the beginning I always had to do the quick calculation in my head to figure out that 21:30 meant 9:30pm, but somewhere along the way it all became instantaneous and automatic. Now, if I look at the clock and see 16:00, it's the same exact thing in my head as if I were seeing 4:00pm, and I think that's really neat.

A similar kind of thing has happened to me with the metric system as well, because after almost five years of living my life in kilograms, liters, and meters, I've certainly gotten the hang of those, and at this point I think I know them well enough to prefer them in many if not all cases. Something I *haven't* gotten used to, however, which fucking sucks, is how the US, the Philippines, Palau, Canada, and Micronesia are the only countries that write their dates in the format of mm/dd/yyyy, while practically everyone else uses dd/mm/yyyy—and I'm not saying that one format is better than the other just yet, but it's just a real pain in the ass for me that my birthday falls within the first 12 days of the calendar month, so there's always room for things to get screwed up. (Because, for example, dates like 09/04 and 04/09 could either be September 4 or April 9, whereas a date like 13/04 and 04/13 is always April 13).

Honestly, I think I do prefer the mm/dd/yyyy format overall because I feel like it does a better job of topicalization (aka leading with the most important piece of information first), kinda like how we say that someone is six-foot-three-inches tall rather than three-inch-six-feet tall. I mean, of course it's nice to go from small to big, and yes, you're *so* smart for figuring out that "a day is smaller than a month is smaller than a year," but in practicality, when we *actually* talk about dates, I feel like it doesn't narrow anything down to start with the number of the day first (since all of the months have at least 28 of those same numbers). At

least starting with 'March,' for example, can divide everything by 12, but the only numbered days that could even *begin* to do anything like that are 29, 30, and 31 (and the only thing dumber than taking that into consideration would be to advocate starting our dates with the year). Think of it this way: if someone needs to guess a day of the year that's closest to your birthday, and you can only give them the number day or the month, which one would you choose? The month gets them within 30 days of the answer every single time (with a 1 in ~30 chance they get it exactly right), whereas the day hardly narrows it down at all (despite the 1 in ~12 chance they get it right, give or take some of the wonkiness that happens after the 28th of each month).

Okay wait, let me try another way: if a doctor knew the exact day when you were going to die (and assuming that you *wanted* to know this information as well), would you rather the doctor tell you that it would be on the 16th of *some* month, or would you rather the doctor tell you that it would be *some* day in March? (Granted, I guess depending on your perspective the former way would be a lot more enjoyable, because then you could throw a party every 17th of the month. But that wasn't my point.)

So maybe you're not onboard with me for any of that shit, but while I still have the chance, I'm gonna offer up an unpopular opinion about Celsius and Fahrenheit that I swear is bulletproof, which is that Fahrenheit makes more sense for us to use than Celsius because when it comes to the way people actually use them in their everyday lives, Fahrenheit seems to be the one that *feels like* it's a better fit for the metric system. Here's what I mean:

First, this whole thing is predicated on the idea that Farenheit is the scale which, *in practice,* we treat as if it operates on a 0-to-100 scale, because in our everyday lives, the outside (and/or inside) weather is virtually the only thing we ever really care to talk about when it comes to temperature.

Furthermore, the average person is not a chemist, so the average person doesn't

give a shit about the anchor points of when water boils and freezes in their daily lives. Not only that, but due to the fact that water freezes and boils at those anchor points—*which are literally visible to us whenever they happen*—having them be at 0 and 100 in Celsius is kind of redundant and not very useful.

How do I know this? Because despite how I happen to know that water freezes at 32 degrees Fahrenheit (because it mattered to me as a kid to know when it would be possible to get a day off from school due to snow), I don't know if I've *ever* committed the temperature that water boils in Fahrenheit to my memory, and the only reason I know that it's somewhere in the ballpark of 230 degrees is because of the quick and shitty conversion technique of multiplying Celsius by 2 and then adding 30 (which gets more and more inaccurate the farther away you start from 10 degrees Celsius in either direction).

I really hope that you're with me on this one, but if not, allow me to beat the absolute shit out of this dead horse by breaking it down another way.

Premise one: In general, measurement scales of 0-to-100 are simpler (or better or easier or more practical or whatever you want to say here) than non-0-to-100 measurement scales.

Premise two: In general, humans talk about temperature as it relates to weather the majority of the time.

Premise three: In general, most places on the planet do not have many (if any) days with low temperatures lower than -15 degrees Celsius, and most places on the planet do not have many (if any) days with high temperatures higher than 40 degrees Celsius.

Premise four: In general, according to premises two and three, humans primarily (if not exclusively) talk about weather as if it were on a scale of -15 to 40 degrees Celsius.

Premise five: In general, most places on the planet do not have many (if any) days with low temperatures lower than 0 degrees Fahrenheit, and most places on the planet do not have many (if any) days with high temperatures higher than 100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Premise six: In general, according to premises two and five, humans primarily (if not exclusively) talk about weather as if it were on a scale of 0-100 degrees Fahrenheit.

Conclusion: In general, Fahrenheit is simpler (or better or easier or more practical or whatever you want to say here) than Celsius for the majority of time humans talk about temperature.

Side note: this reminds me of something else that makes even less sense to me, which is how a lot of European countries (and I guess languages) refuse to refer to the ground floor of a building as the first floor. For example, in Germany, they call the second floor the first floor, and they call the first floor the ground floor, which is basically the "zero-th" or "zero-st" floor. I have a hard time reconciling with this one. It's like, "Okay, so you've just entered a building, and you're standing on some floor. Is this the first floor you've encountered, or have you encountered another floor before it?"

"This is the first floor I've encountered."

"So you're on the first floor, then?"

"No, that's the one above me."

It feels like that scene from Spongebob (that gets used as a meme template all the time) where Patrick drops his wallet and the Man Ray character tries to give it back to him despite Patrick's refusal.

Man Ray: Excuse me, sir, but I do believe you've dropped your wallet.

Patrick: Doesn't look familiar to me.

Man Ray: What? I just saw you drop it. Here.

Patrick: Nope, it's not mine.

Man Ray: It *is* yours. I am trying to be a good person and return it to you.

Patrick: Return what to who?

Man Ray: Aren't you Patrick Star?

Patrick: Yup.

Man Ray: And this is your ID.

Patrick: Yup.

Man Ray: I found this ID in this wallet. And if that's the case, this must be your wallet.

Patrick: That makes sense to me.

Man Ray: Then take it.

Patrick: It's not my wallet.

I guess the only other way that I can rationalize this in my head is to think of how our elevation is zero when we're at sea level, so that could be analogous to the ground floor being zero as well. In fact, the truth is, in Germany, the ground floor is usually labeled EG or E for *Erdgeschoss* (groundfloor), while the floors above it are labeled things like OG.1 and OG.2 for *Obergeschoss* (as in above ground floor), so in that case the second floor is not really called the first floor, it's called the first floor above the ground floor. (*But whatever, I'm still gonna die on that hill*.)

Something else that hits me particularly hard every time I visit the States is the amount of spam texts and phone calls I get while I'm on US soil. That shit is seriously out of control, and if I hadn't been trying to get better at choosing my battles, it might have been enough to keep me from moving back on its own. But speaking of texts, there's something else that would have annoyed the piss out of me (*if I hadn't started showing amazing personal growth here*), and that's the thought of having to return to using the prehistoric technology of SMS text messaging (aka the thing that should only ever be used for login activation codes and two-factor authentications), because despite how Whatsapp (which is an American company, btw) became the world's top messaging app in 2015, Americans don't really use it unless they or someone else they know go/goes abroad.

Side note: if you're at all interested in why that's the case, the truth is, this was probably the fault of American telecoms for rolling out free unlimited SMS texting (for nights and weekends at first and then eventually all the time) back in the day, which sidestepped the need for cheaper (and/or better) messaging options via data (which the rest of the world ultimately adopted), and then when Apple decided to launch its own proprietary iMessage in 2011, that totally screwed the US from ever being able to move on from SMS—because Apple just *had* to put its special little members-only hat on something as simple as text messaging. (That's right, iPhone Stans, it's *Apple's* fault that group text

messages between devices suck because Apple handcuffed everyone to ancient SMS technology instead of upgrading to RCS group texts like everyone else. Hope you're having fun in your walled garden.)

Another thing I think is stupid is how the price of high-speed internet in the States is so much higher than practically everywhere else I've been. (Okay, I looked it up, and in 2015 the US had the ninth most expensive broadband out of the 34 countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development at the time. That's not the worst, but it's still bad.) How does that even make sense? I mean, didn't America basically invent high-speed internet? (I didn't look that up.) And now I pay less than half of what my parents pay and I have internet that's twice as fast. Why? Because most territories in the US have been gobbled up by the Big Internet service providers so that the majority of Americans only have two or three options, and that's not enough competition to stop them from charging whatever they want. (Relevant: in 1996, the US effectively got rid of policies that encouraged competition when the Telecommunications Act allowed for industry consolidation of ISPs.)

I guess that's kind of par for the course in the US though, and most people are just used to some things that don't make sense to other parts of the world. Take, for example, how big of an issue gerrymandering is in the US, despite it being totally illegal in so many other places. Have you ever seen the map of the 2nd congressional district of Texas? That shit is insane. There's also Ohio's 4th congressional district, which it's my personal favorite because it's in the shape of a duck. But that shit is insane, too, and it's also so deeply undemocratic that it makes total sense why it happens so much in the US. (*Ah shit, am I getting political now?*)

Another thing that doesn't make sense to people in other parts of the world is how American television has Big Pharma commercials that encourage people to ask their doctors about the drug being advertised, as if that were totally normal. It's like, shouldn't the doctors be the ones to decide which kinds of treatments people need, why do they need to give their doctors hints?

I guess this brings me to my last major hangup about the idea of returning to the US, which is the realization that I'd have to give up my German healthcare. Damn, that shit would sting. And I don't think I even want to open that can of worms right now, but I will say that it would feel pretty shitty to go back to a system where the *majority* of citizens would have to declare medical bankruptcy if they or their partner were giving birth to a baby and there was a problem that caused the baby to die, which means they would not only lose their baby, but they would also walk away drowning in medical debt from the insane bill they'd get from the hospital's attempt at saving it. I think that alone is enough reason to justify why you never ever see any citizens of other countries protesting their government to install a healthcare system like that of the US (unless they're looking for a sweet new business model, of course). Also, just so we're clear, if you're a taxpaying German citizen with health insurance, the financial cost of losing your baby is zero.

Side note: I guess this kind of turned into me ragging on America for no reason again, but all I'm really trying to say is that I wish that some things were better in the country of my birth, and I don't think that's so wrong of a wish. Nevertheless, whenever an American criticizes America, they usually get labeled as a communist or a conspiracy theorist, and here's what I have to say about that: it's not a conspiracy theory that people in government (in any country) are capable of doing corrupt shit, however it *is* a conspiracy theory that the US is run by reptilian lizard people like Mark Zuckerberg, Mitch McConnell, Rick Scott, and any of those megachurch pastors with private jets like Kenneth Copeland who are all hell-bent on taking over the world. (By the way, there's this video of the Zuck from a live Q and A where someone asks him if he's secretly a lizard, and after you watch it, even though he *does* say no, the way he answers it does *not* steer you to believe him as much as it ought to. Or even at all. That guy is totally a lizard.)

Anyway, I guess my real concern is what got us to this point, because despite how other countries seem to make real efforts to ensure that their citizens have somewhat guaranteed access to affordable housing, healthcare, childcare, and

education, America doesn't really prioritize doing that for everyone, and the country doesn't really gain anything by having once been the land of equal opportunity if it no longer is. I mean, who cares if you were the star of the football team in high school if all you did afterwards was get arrested for DUIs? It's like, the United States is Lindsay Lohan. (*Sorry, Lindsay.*)

Tangent: a couple of months ago, at an airport in Italy, I met an older couple from the US who non-sarcastically asked me where the city of Florence keeps its homeless people because they didn't see very many during their time there. I'm not gonna say which state they were from (but it rhymes with *Alifooooornia*).

Honestly, I'm not going to go so far as to use the indoctrination word as the reason why things turned out this way, but as a former easily disillusioned journalism graduate, I gotta say that Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model in Manufacturing Consent (which points to the acceptance of government policies by people in the USA on the basis of the mass media's limited selection of content to favor the values of those in power while denying them access to alternative views that could lead them to oppose such policies) is pretty damn compelling—especially when you consider that although 90 percent of US media (including radio, television, newspapers, magazines, books, music, movies, internet sources, and cable) was owned by 50 companies in 1983, once that pesky Telecommunications Act in 1996 came along, that same 90 percent of US media quickly became consolidated into the hands of just six ownership companies (i.e., Viacom, News Corporation, Comcast, CBS, Time Warner and Disney), so it's no wonder the US media is a completely different animal these days.

I remember when I was working for the Summer Olympics in Rio, I felt like half of my work was spent dealing with the American media's bullshit spins surrounding the Zika virus despite how the city of Miami was a more favorable environment than Rio was for the *Aedes Aegypti* mosquitoes carrying the virus. This was because it was actually winter in the southern hemisphere at the time, which meant that the daily high and low temperatures during that particular

August up in Miami (roughly between 23 and 33 degrees Celsius) were a lot closer to the optimal temperature range for the skeeters to thrive (roughly between 28 and 32 degrees Celsius) than they were down in Rio (roughly between 17 and 27 degrees Celsius with the occasional high in the 30s). Also, if the lows at night hit 14 degrees (which I think it did in some places), that would be low enough for the little fuckers to start dying off.

But anyway, yeah, if you do enough lobbying and shove enough garbage down people's throats, eventually they're going to start crapping it back out on the other side, right? It's just marketing and rebranding, and the six ownership groups of the US media machine are evidently really fucking good at it. They've rebranded medical history as pre-existing conditions, they've rebranded brown-skinned people as terrorists (and white mass shooters as misguided kids with good hearts), and they've rebranded (what otherwise could have been) taxes as premiums, copays, deductibles, out-of-network fees, and whatever else causes so many people to somehow think that everyone having equal access to healthcare is a bad thing in and of itself, or that it's normal and acceptable that American schoolteachers often have to buy their own classroom school supplies out of their own pockets (which usually comes at a much higher cost than whatever tax break they could ever get).

It's like, what kind of kayfabe is going on to the point where people are convinced that they would rather have billionaires taking advantage of the system than the people below the poverty line? I mean, damn, if anyone should be allowed to take advantage of the system, shouldn't it be those who are at a disadvantage?

Anyhow, there was a pair of charts I saw online a few months ago (and clearly still think about) with some data on income inequality, and what they basically showed was this: from 1980 to 2016, the bottom 50 percent of Western Europe went from receiving about 23 percent of all (inter)national income to about 22 percent (meaning it remained roughly the same), whereas in the US, the bottom 50 percent went from receiving 21 percent of all national income to about 13

percent. Meanwhile, during that same period from 1980 to 2016, the top 1 percent of Western Europe went from receiving about 10 percent of all (inter)national income to about 11 percent (meaning it also remained roughly the same), whereas in the US, the top 1 percent went from receiving about 11 percent of all national income to about 20 percent.

I think it's a bit hard to believe that either the people or the system (or both) allowed that kind of thing to happen in the US, but then again, we're not only talking about a place where tax software companies spend millions of dollars lobbying for people to have to pay them in order to file their taxes, but we're also talking about a place where despite how 70 percent of last year's (ATOW) US taxpayers were eligible for the nation's free online tax filing program, less than 2 percent of all individual tax returns were filed that way (because apparently they didn't know, or they were all duped by deceptive marketing from the very companies that joined the program). Also, just so we're clear, the way it worked for me in Germany last year was that my tax return was filed automatically and all I had to do was look at it to make sure that the numbers were correct if I wanted to—which I obviously did because I'm an American who couldn't believe it could be so simple. (The numbers were obviously correct.)

I guess the point I'm trying to make here is that money is power and that brute force marketing is pretty damn effective in the States. I mean, take it from me, a ~~dipshit~~ guy who quit his job as CMO/Head of Marketing earlier this year: if there's a customer acquisition cost that's more or less equal between you and the competition, and if you have way more money than your competitors, then all you gotta do is have a decently functional product and then you can just assblast the shit out of your advertising spend to victory.

For example, last year (ATOW) a Chinese company called ByteDance spent somewhere between $800 Million and $1 Billion (according to an article I read in Ad Age) to acquire a social media startup called musical.ly, which targets the teenage market in the US. The app itself is just a platform for creating short lip-

sync and comedy videos (so it operates in the same general way that Snapchat does and Vine once did), but like two months ago ByteDance merged musical.ly with its own app called Douyin (or TikTok in the US), which is currently spending so much fucking money on advertisements that it is now the first Chinese app to ever be the most downloaded app in the US. I have no idea how much money they're actually spending on ads, but based on the fact that they're virtually everywhere right now (at least in my world), this thing looks like it's going to be absolutely fucking massive, and I for one am never going to download it because all of their ads are just videos that were clearly created on other platforms years ago but now have their logo dancing all over them. Either way, when this timebomb of an app totally blows up in popularity (which makes me think TikTok is a great name for it), I think it's going to be really hard to tell if people decided that it was something they actually wanted to make popular, or if it was just the product of brute force marketing on the biggest of scales. It also makes me wonder if there's anything nefarious going on behind the scenes because early critics have brought up the fact that China's internet security laws make it illegal for TikTok to refuse to share its user data (such as image, location, and biometric data) with the Chinese government, lol.

Another good example is how the anti-smoking campaign in the US totally worked, and I have no idea why or how Big Tobacco managed to let that happen. (It probably had to do with the differences between the court systems or something.) Then again, since Europeans still smoke like crazy these days, maybe Big Tobacco just moved over there because of the classic joke that all of those people have health insurance for lung cancer either way. That said, if you're too poor to afford cancer treatment in the US, you can always pull yourself up by your bootstraps and go to Home Depot so you can buy the tools to make your own cancer treatment.

Alright, even though I said I was deliberately going to purge all of this crap out of my system, I think I'm getting a little too carried away here, so I'm just gonna stop. I mean, I *do* care about the reality that I'm living in enough to be disappointed when it's not what I think it could be, but I'm not out here trying to change anyone else's opinions on this stuff—and there's this thing called motivated reasoning that makes it nearly impossible to change someone's mind

on the internet anyway due to techniques like identity-protective cognition (aka being dismissive of uncomfortable ideas), biased assimilation (aka only remembering supporting ideas), and biased information search (aka staying in a bubble of your choice).

So now I'm gonna take a few deep breaths, admit that there's also a lot of inequality, corruption, racism, homelessness, and whatever else I criticized about the US across all of Europe and the rest of the world as well (because as Mac from It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia put it, "I'm playing both sides so that I always come out on top"), and then I'm finally going to put all of this bikeshedding behind me and hopefully never talk about this hogwash again.

I honestly don't even feel great after doing this chapter (so there's another lesson learned), and I imagine this one probably sucked as a result, but I wanna thank you for sticking with me because now I'm finally ready to bring this whole damn thing home with one last chapter.

Let's make it a good one.

…

I wrote this on flights from Stockholm to Oakland, 4 October 2018 and Denver to London, 13 October 2018.

XXX

Chapter 25: The Moment Game

If you've ever heard of The Game (*no, not the rapper who had a few hit singles with 50 Cent in 2005*), then you'll know what I mean when I say that I just lost The Game.

If you're not sure what that is, it's an annoying little mind game where the entire point is to avoid thinking about it—and if you *do* think about The Game, you immediately lose and therefore have to announce it to the people around you. (And just to get this out of the way, no, you don't also lose The Game when someone else brings it up, that would be ridiculous.)

The reason why The Game works is because you can't decide *not* to play it. This is due to what's known as the ironic process theory, which has also been called the white bear principle in reference to a Fyodor Dostoevsky line from an essay he wrote about his trip to Europe in the 1860s: "Try to pose for yourself this task: *not* to think of a polar bear, and you will see that the cursed thing will come to mind every minute." Similarly, these days you'll often hear people bring up a closely related social phenomenon called the Streisand effect, which is when someone tries to censor, hide, or remove scandalous information, only to have it backfire by drawing even more attention to it (aka why *that* photo of Beyoncé will never be scrubbed from the internet).

Anyway, for the last ten years or so, I've been playing my own kind of mind game that I've never really told anyone about; it's single-player, and you don't lose whenever you think of it. (You don't win when you think of it either, but that's because you're more of a spectator despite how you're the only one playing.) I've also never given it an actual name before, so from now on I'll just call it The Moment. Here's how it works:

Close your eyes for a second and try to envision the big picture overview of your life. Imagine it as if everything were plotted out on one single visual timeline. Now think about where you are today, who you are, and how you got to this very point. That's basically what it means to think of The Moment.

Kinda dull, right? *Yes, but that's only because it's your first time.*

See, from now on, the *next* time you think of The Moment (while also envisioning that exact same timeline of your life), *that's* when you get to reflect on whatever you did to fill the gap between this Moment and that one—and I promise it gets way more interesting the more and more times this happens, especially if you like the idea of thinking to yourself, "How the hell did I end up *here*…after *there*?"

Overall, my guess is that I've only had about 20 or 30 Moments in total over the last 10 years, and I think the longest I've ever gone between two Moments is a year and a half. (*I'm surprised I haven't kept track, honestly.*) I know I had one when I was in Morocco a few months ago. I know I had one the first (and only) time I visited Berlin before moving there. And I also vividly remember the one I had on my 25th birthday when I was walking on a sidewalk in Copacabana.

Here's what I think is thought-provoking about all of this: that no matter how much time goes by in between any two Moments, it always feels like no time has passed at all; it's like, when you put it into this particular context, it doesn't even matter how much real time has elapsed, because our thoughts are no farther away from a memory we had last month than they are from a memory we had seven years ago (because what happens when we're thinking of a memory from last month is essentially the same thing that happens when we're thinking of a memory from seven years ago). Of course, some of our memories are bound to be stronger and/or more readily accessible than others, but that doesn't really matter in this context because they're all equally behind us anyway.

Let me try to articulate a bit better.

Throughout your entire life, have you ever truly done something "yesterday," or did you always do something when yesterday was still today? (I'm hoping you say the latter.)

How about tomorrow? Have you ever done anything tomorrow? (Answer: of course not, because you can only ever do it when tomorrow is today.)

Let's go further.

Have you ever done something fifteen minutes ago, or fifteen minutes from now? (No, not unless you're still and/or already doing it now, right? Because you always do it when you're doing it, which necessarily has to be now.)

What I'm trying to get at here is that I'm not sure if time exists the way we usually talk about it, as if there were a linear past, present, and future. I mean, first of all, that's already the simplest approach and/or explanation possible (which is kind of to be expected), and since we can't really prove that approach wrong, we hardly ever think about it enough to question it.

Second of all, we also know some crazy things about time due to special relativity, such as how light moves so fast that it doesn't really experience time at all (or at least, not in the same way we do, because what we call "time" does not apply to light). This is why two working clocks will report different times at different accelerations, and yet Maxwell's equations show us that every

observer, no matter their speed, will measure the exact same speed for light.

Third of all, I'm not about to meander off into some crackpot string theory about time dilation or whatever in my final chapter, but what I do want to say is that I sometimes think the past only seems like a reality because it *was* a reality, however it's also not one anymore. Meanwhile, since the future has yet to become a reality, I think it's fair to say that the future is therefore not a reality (yet) either. Thus, if we can rule both of those out, then the only reality we have left is the reality of the present here and now—which kinda makes me want to say that time itself does not exist, and that only moments do.

Side note: holy fuck, no, this is *not* going to be one of those "live your life in the moment" kind of endings, so get the hell out of here with that noise. And what's the deal with all the hype about living in the moment anyway? I mean, how can you *not* live in the moment when it's literally the only option? (Unless we're talking about saying Yolo as an excuse to justify hasty decisions you've made without considering the consequences, then I guess I get it.)

The point is, despite how we can try to prolong our good moments as much as possible, and despite how much we can try to arrange for our future moments to be great, we're still just out here teleporting from one moment to the next, and I think my little game makes that stand out whether it's the truth or not. Either way, now that I'm reflecting on it and comparing all of my most recent Moments, I can't help but find myself thinking about where I would like the next one to occur—which is totally stupid and defeats the entire purpose of the exercise (because we're only supposed to observe The Moment when it happens rather than try to plan it all out; it is in no way supposed to affect how we live our lives, it's just an opportunity to take a bird's eye view of our own personal journey every now and then). And whatever, maybe I'm just thinking about planning the next one because my stint of living in Germany has come to an end and I'm entering into a transition period where I don't know what's next.

Of course, this little book of mine is coming to an end as well, and I gotta say, currently I am absolutely overwhelmed with the urge to give out some kind of great big sweeping advice or something before I say goodbye. It's like, I wanted a platform, so I made one, and even though it's a billion times smaller than I think it is, I still feel a rush of wanting to get every last drop out of it before it's too late. It's weird, too, because I was never really planning to lecture so much back when I first started writing again, but sometimes the column format just kind of forces a person to do things that way, and that's what's smacking me in the face right now.

I'm also overwhelmed with the urge to acknowledge (once again) that nobody really cares what I think, and that even if they did, it probably wouldn't do them any good. Still, the column format also kinda forced me to turn myself into a protagonist of some kind (so I've had to share what "he" thinks), and whether or not I've fictionalized myself along the way, a rule of storytelling is that the main character needs to have some type of resolution by the end. That said, I never really had an arc in mind at the beginning, and now that I've suddenly teleported to the ending, I don't think I have one. I mean, shit, one moment I was back in college writing a column about how my dream job was to take over for Alex Trebek as the next host of Jeopardy, and the next I was writing a column on a flight "home" to Berlin after commuting to Milan for the day, which was five years later.

Side note: that's also the story of how Chapter 1 came about, by the way, and I don't think I ever mentioned that until now. I simply thought it was so freaking cool that I was able to fly to Italy in the morning just to run a day-long design workshop with an old colleague before flying back to Germany that same night, so that's what ended up inspiring me to write what ultimately became Chapter 1 on the flight back. And I know that this whole damn thing has been about me me me ever since then, but do you know what? I think it's okay to be so excited by certain parts of life that you want to tell everyone else about how fascinating they are to you. Nevertheless, there was still a strange discussion I had to have with myself about egoism in order to do that, because it's like, "Who am I to be writing a book in the first place, and who am I to be asking people to read it on top of that?" (And then it was like, "Well, I guess I'm the same as anyone else

who has done it before me, then.")

But in all seriousness, the fact that you're using some of your own ~~time~~ moments to be here with me is something that means the world to me. I don't even care if there's only six people in total who ever read this. You're one of them, and that's incredibly special to me.

I've spent so much time on airplanes this year writing about things as if I knew them. I obviously don't. I'm not sure if anyone does. We as humans have spent an eternity trying to understand what reality is all about so that we can finally piece together just what makes the world so weird, and even though there's been an estimated 100 billion people in total to have ever existed, so far none of us have figured it out. It also feels like we're not really making any progress either, because we almost never talk about shit like death, the universe, the meaning of life, our purpose, and a whole host of other things that we could be talking about *every single day* if we wanted to.

Is it because we get exhausted by not having the answers? Is it because it's just better not to think about those things? Is it because we wouldn't even be able to tell what the answers were even if we already had them? Is it because knowing the truth would break our spirit? Is it because the answers are beyond the realm of what we have the ability to comprehend in the first place? Is it because there are no answers? (And does that count as an answer, if so?)

I think the hardest part about all of this is grappling with the comprehension problem. It's like, we somehow want to have all these fancy made-up reasons for why we exist and what everything means (as if it were a simple albeit unbelievably complicated thing that we should definitely be able to wrap our heads around), and yet we also have a tendency sometimes to get defensive or frustrated about the extent of our capacity as if there can't possibly be something that our minds just can't get. It's as if the mere concept of us being unable to process certain information were unacceptable to us, when the truth is, that's

probably the most reasonable answer there ever was. I mean, shit, if there are limitations to the intelligence of a frog, why the fuck would we be any different, apart from having a much higher baseline?

Nevertheless, when we look at certain animals, or bugs, or whatever else has a smaller brain than us, and we ponder what that thing thinks about its own existence, we usually conclude that it simply doesn't. The problem *we're* having, however, is that we either don't think about our own existence, or we do, and since we don't have an answer when we do, we remain in conflict. As a result, sometimes we just have to resign to the fact that we may never get an answer, and at that point we simply have to be okay with just witnessing what it is to exist and to be alive—because at the end of the day, life is either something that happens to us or it's something that we make happen. (Or it's neither of those things, making it a true fifty-fifty-fifty split.)

So here's what I'm thinking: I know that this is the ending, and I know that I'm also overcome with the desire to share some kind of sage wisdom that I don't have, but I'm just going to do it anyway while I still have your attention. And as I was kinda saying before, writing in a column format really begs a person to give out unsolicited advice, so what I'm going to do now instead is take a buckshot approach and share some of the conclusions about our world as I see it.

(Also, please do me a favor and try not to be annoyed by how repetitive the pattern gets. This will all be over soon anyway, and I love that you've made it this far. Let's bring it home.) Ready? Here we go:

The meaning of life is seeing people you know in places you've never been.

The meaning of life is noticing it when you're multitasking.

The meaning of life is appreciating the simple physical characteristics about our world, such as how removing a sticker from something metal is easier if you heat up the other side first.

The meaning of life is forgiving people earlier than later.

The meaning of life is when you notice smudges on a car window and identify them as spots from where a dog's nose has been.

The meaning of life is to be the only species on the planet smart enough to be capable of deliberately destroying it, and then destroying it, apparently.

The meaning of life is allowing yourself to fail.

The meaning of life is knowing how much our thoughts would change if we ever saw a legit UFO landing with aliens popping out to say hello.

The meaning of life is trying to prepare yourself to be a good parent and then trying to be one.

The meaning of life is the first three seasons of Arrested Development.

The meaning of life is being supportive.

The meaning of life is doing whatever it takes to change whatever your belief system is into something that helps you take better care of your health.

The meaning of life is posting unedited pictures (and/or videos) of yourself on social media.

The meaning of life is taking steady aim and still missing the target.

The meaning of life is a memory of being on the subway in New York City and witnessing a girl accidentally leave her scarf behind as she got off the train, but then an old asian man grabbed it and tossed it onto the platform a split second before the doors closed.

The meaning of life is to figure out that what you care about is more important than figuring out what you want.

The meaning of life is deciding for yourself whether you're someone who likes putting dishes away on top of the clean pile (so that you end up using the same dishes over and over again) or on the bottom of the clean pile (so that they all end up having the same general wear and tear over time).

The meaning of life is realizing that moving your eyes and moving your eyelids are two different things.

The meaning of life is allowing things that once had symbolic meaning to you

continue to have it.

The meaning of life is something that has to do with the worst thing you've ever done to another person.

The meaning of life is scoring the fastest airport security lane and then letting someone else go ahead of you.

The meaning of life is surprise money pockets.

The meaning of life is sometimes starting with the frozen items when you go grocery shopping just to put yourself on the clock.

The meaning of life is learning a hard lesson and then having that lesson not even apply the next time you're in a similar situation.

The meaning of life is to not already be looking at a hot girl or guy the first time she or he looks your way, so that when you both finally make eye contact, you catch them looking at you.

The meaning of life is to never ever let the places you've been be more important than the people you've met or the places you've yet to go.

The meaning of life is when you're driving in the rain and the windshield wipers happen to be synchronized to the beat of your music, *or* when the song you're

listening to ends at the exact same time that you arrive at your destination.

The meaning of life is taking all of the clothes you intended to pack in a carry-on for an upcoming trip, putting them in a big plastic bag, taking it to the airport on the day of your flight, going through security, and then buying a suitcase from a shop that sells suitcases just so that they don't go out of business. (Seriously, why would anyone need a suitcase *after* security?)

The meaning of life is when a baby animal gets the hiccups.

The meaning of life is having guests over.

The meaning of life is to consider the idea that the only thing that might actually have any true meaning (or value or significance) is probably some form of self-expression.

The meaning of life is to figure out what your personal demons are, and then deciding how you want to handle them, if at all.

The meaning of life is knowing that *if* we could foresee the results of all of our actions, we might be too scared to act.

The meaning of life is the kind of sleep that you know you're about to get when you adjust your pillow and then it feels like a brand new comfortable pillow position that you've never found before.

The meaning of life is watching a bird fly away without taking your eyes off it until it gets so teeny tiny that you can't even see it anymore.

The meaning of life is the frisson you get while listening to Jack Black sing a rendition of Marvin Gaye's *Let's Get it On* at the end of John Cusack and his writing team's film adaptation of Nick Hornby's novel High Fidelity.

The meaning of life is knowing that watching a replay of our lives would never be as good as the first time through.

The meaning of life is doing really asinine things but thinking about them in a really thoughtful way.

The meaning of life is peaking at exactly 26 years old and then, just, like, coming to terms with that or whatever.

The meaning of life is trying to be in more people's corners than you have in your own.

The meaning of life is having a shitty passport photo.

The meaning of life is to be a grown-up when you should, and a kid when you shouldn't. (Interpret the ambiguity as you wish.)

The meaning of life is the Youtube video called "The Entire 'Here Comes the

Pizza' affair," where a Red Sox fan gets a pizza thrown at him at a baseball game, and the commentary team goes in-depth with their analysis that includes multiple replays.

The meaning of life is to feel absolutely free to be absolutely pathetic at something, and to make others feel that they are absolutely free to be absolutely pathetic at something as well.

The meaning of life is trying to figure out what you really, really, really, really want, and then reflecting on whether or not your life took you towards or away from it, and then reflecting on whether or not you still want (and can get) it, and then reflecting on whether or not you'd still have fun if you do or don't get it.

The meaning of life is to have all your scars on your front and none of them on your back.

The meaning of life is accepting that your own personal desire to feel understood might never be satisfied.

The meaning of life is quite possibly as simple as eating good food in moderation.

The meaning of life is to do everything in your power to make sure that your kids don't have to go through the same hardships that you did, only to end up guaranteeing that they don't learn the same lessons you did, which means they'll inevitably cause their children to go through the same hardships that you originally went through anyway, because it all skips a generation.

The meaning of life is that time when an Italian football coach responded to a journalist's question about how training was going by shouting, "Sometimes maybe good, sometimes maybe shit!"

The meaning of life is being okay with changing your mind. (*Wait, no it's not.*)

The meaning of life is figuring out the true meaning of that damn semantic triangle.

The meaning of life is keeping your Duolingo streak alive.

The meaning of life is being alone at a friend's place, getting hungry, and then deciding to eat things out of their pantry in order of least noticeable if missing.

The meaning of life is admitting when you feel like a fraud.

The meaning of life is giving it a shot anyway.

The meaning of life is the first thing you think of when you try to come up with one of these yourself.

The meaning of life is probably something random that Bernie Sanders was probably advocating for in a video from 25 years ago.

The meaning of life is making a secret pledge to your brother-in-law that if he ever wants to buy his son something that your sister (his wife) would get mad at him for getting your nephew, then you'd get it for him as the cool aunt or uncle.

The meaning of life is to go to Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro at least once before you die. Try to make it twice, though.

The meaning of life is the ridiculous moment when a professional bowler named Pete Weber hit some kind of significant bowling shot to win a championship and then got so pumped up about it that he shouted, *"YES! GOD DAMN IT! YES! That is right, I did it! Number five, are you kidding me? That's right! Who do you think you are? I am! Damn it right!"*

The meaning of life is the tough-to-swallow pill that says being a critic is so much easier than being a problem solver, and to know that the world needs problem solvers way more than it needs critics.

The meaning of life is literally screaming at the actual top of your fucking lungs.

The meaning of life is saying "Let's make it a true Daily Double" to Alex Trebek.

The meaning of life is swinging for the fucking fences.

The meaning of life is knowing that the very first fight that former heavyweight

boxing champion Mike Tyson ever got in was the result of a childhood bully who decided to injure a pigeon in front of him.

The meaning of life is the story about how the lead singer of a band called Semisonic secretly hid the true meaning of the band's hit song Closing Time, which most people (and perhaps even his bandmates) thought was about going home after a bar closing or something, when it was really about taking his newborn daughter home from the hospital for the first time.

The meaning of life is to cruise through green lights and blow through the occasional reds, but to never ever waste time hesitating at a yellow.

And finally, the meaning of life is writing a book about people who unnecessarily wait at crosswalks, not being able to relate to your father, deciding who you would bang on the subway if you absolutely had to, getting a whiskey glass smashed on your face, spicing up and/or breaking out of routines, really good memes, really odd pet peeves, seeking approval and/or validation on social media, pretending to be Canadian to avoid having to talk about US politics, a lot of footnotes, oversharing weird thoughts and confessions, coming to terms with getting a haircut, eating with your hands like a goddamn animal, sharing everything you know about budget traveling, pitching ideas for sketch comedy videos you'll never ever film, spending way too much time coming up with meaningless sports hypotheticals, realizing how much of a mooch you really are, days when everything seems to go your way, days when being a dumb tourist should've killed you, accomplishing a year-long goal, becoming completely enamored with linguistics in a span of like five years (and still being afraid to screw up whenever you try speaking a new language), going phoneless to test how much of a cyborg you really are, figuring out your goals, choosing better hills to die on, and absolutely, positively, under no circumstances, living in the moment.

Alright, I am so happy and excited to be wrapping all of this up despite the fact

that I'm going to feel completely numb once I finally hit send and unload everything in one huge cathartic bombshell. Honestly, this has probably become a way bigger deal to me than it ever should have been, so I think what I'm looking forward to the most is the day when I can finally stop talking about it.

But whatever. I like to romanticize things, I like big powerful moments, I like when things are cheesy sometimes, I like long-winded conclusions, I like writing letters to my father before moving to a new country, I like ~~talking about myself~~ the idea of getting over myself and focusing more on doing things for other people, I like the idea of continuing to discover the world, I like the idea of settling down, I like the thought of being able to tell my grandchildren about that one year in my twenties when I took a hundred flights, and I like the decision I've made to go work on a fishing boat in Alaska next summer.

And after that? Who knows… Maybe I'll be seeing you in a place that neither of us has ever been.

After all, we're only a few *Moments* away from each other, aren't we?

Thanks for reading. Safe travels.

…

I wrote this on a flight from Oslo to Fort Lauderdale, 23 November 2018.

XXX