

Forces

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When the Iceland volcano erupted, I was on the western side of England, somewhere north of Manchester. Imperceptibly fine volcanic dust immediately began to infiltrate the upper atmosphere above Europe and within a day all planes were grounded; a somewhat more sensible decision than allowing them to fall passenger-filled from the sky with engines destroyed by the abrasive action of nature's finest pebbles. The next evening I was due to fly to Sweden, but the demon dust from Hell's Kitchen had developed in one day, so no doubt it would clear in another. That turned out to be a poor hypothesis.

Rather than flying, the next evening I was surfing the Internet searching for alternative means of escaping my prison island. I, and hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of others.

In my schedule I had allowed a restful weekend with friends in Stockholm before an intense week of presentations across the country. Teachers would be waiting for me, having made uncountable numbers of personal and systemic adjustments to be available for the few dates I was able to attend. Surely not even Napoleon in exile on Elba had longed as much to reach the shores of Mother Europe. *England's green and pleasant land* was not where I needed to be.

I did eventually reach those shores with the help of a hire car, a cross-country train, an overnight ferry on the North Sea, a sleeping cabin for six racing through the second night on a train from Amsterdam to Copenhagen, a local train to Malmö in Sweden's south and a taxi to the school where I was appointed to be at midday on Wednesday. With a wash, and a change of shirt for the first time in almost three days, we were ready to roll.

Regrettably though, I had not been able to fulfil Monday and Tuesday appointments in Växjö and Kalmar.

Aeroplanes idle on the earth is not profitable for anyone. Airline companies crumble first, but eventually the non-movement of goods and people causes economies to follow into the financial abyss. This time, the force of nature would not win against the force of human nature. The desire for profit, or at the very least solvency, would see the first planes were flying again in a week. So now, Växjö had been rescheduled for today and Kalmar would follow at the end of the week.

This Tuesday began early with a local Stockholm train to Västerhaninge and the weather closing in. Snow was forecast. In fact, 20cm of snow by the end of the day, but surely nature would not try to impede me again. The work at Västerhaninge would finish at midday. Three hundred or so kilometres south at Växjö there would 100+ teachers waiting for me at 16:00 for a four hour workshop. The snow began falling at morning coffee time.

The taxi arrived as we finished for lunch, and as the snow was building to around 2cm. The flurry became storm-like as the driver headed north and west along freeways and through tunnels under Stockholm to Bromma, the city's second airport. We emerged from the basalt bowels of the metropolis at about 80kph onto the E4 with snowflakes suiciding horizontally into the windscreen. The snow was deeper here, the traffic thicker and the road damp and slippery, but not yet icy. My driver commented that this was the busiest road in all Sweden. Comforting; in these conditions, it was therefore the most likely place for a traffic jam. And that's exactly what happened.

Four lanes had slowed to a crawl before the gantry signs started flashing 30, which would have been way too fast anyway. We could do nothing but snail along wondering about the length of this tailback and watching the time tick away. Small piles of snow built up in sheltered parts where the wipers couldn't reach.

Eventually the cause came into view. A huge scrap metal truck with two massive bins was stationary in the middle lane. We were on a bridge above Stockholm's harbour and the wind had lifted the lid of one bin so it stood vertically, like an inverted keel, above its hinges. The driver had stopped only metres before ripping down the next gantry.

One by one cars moved left and right around it and eventually we reached Bromma. Hunched against the blowing snow, I shook the driver's hand and avoided slipping as I struggled to the nearby terminal entrance. Would the plane leave?

Two years earlier I arrived at Heathrow in similar unseasonal snow. Terminal 5 had been open for one week. It was the newest and perhaps biggest terminal in the world; the pride of British Airways. The snow was only 2cm on the ground, but every flight was cancelled. I stood in a queue for five hours just to reach the desk to be rescheduled. I was delayed 13 hours, again in an attempt to reach Stockholm for work. Bromma is just a regional airport compared to Heathrow. I didn't like my chances.

But everything here looked 'business as usual'. There were no queues, people were calmly lunching in the food court and Information told me my check in desk would open in about 15 minutes. At the appointed time we stepped out of the terminal building, trudged and slipped through snow, slush and ice across open ground to the small turbo prop plane and buckled up. From my window I could see green man using a broom to brush snow from some sort of tube leading to the plane. The view wasn't clear because snow flakes were sticking to the glass, but in the distance there seemed to be some activity on the runway. The sky was obvious though. It was almost on top of us. Dark grey and leaden, the clouds seemed only 50 metres above. But no one seemed nervous and I was the only one who jumped as a machine gun-like rata-tat-tat strafed along the top of the fuselage. Then a dribble, followed by a stream, of orange-brown liquid slid down my window taking the snow flakes with it. The plane was being de-iced and through the clearing glass I could see tractor-like vehicles on the runway.

A few moments later orange man appeared mounted on his mobile cherry picker. He wore no hat and the wind was blowing his shoulder length hair into endless, snow-decorated tangles. His scarf was wound several times around his neck but then hung loosely between the flaps of his unzipped fluorescent jacket ending near the waist of his waterproof trousers. Like Al Capone with a Tommy gun he pointed his dual hand grip pressure cleaner directly at me and doused our side with its share of the syrup that was the difference between flight and frustration. He worked his way along the fuselage and the wing then flicked a switch and worked his way back along the wing drenching it in a yellow-green liquid. Green man, below and behind the wing, stepped back to the cover of a box on wheels at the other end of his tube.

On the runway I could now distinguish the activity. Four, count them, one, two, three, four, grader size snow ploughs sped up and down the asphalt, yellow lights flashing, followed by some form of support truck. Heathrow, not just Terminal 5, but the whole of Heathrow, had one snow plough and no orange men!

Orange man gave his last squirt and his truck backed away. The pilot started first the starboard, then port engine. Green man disconnected his tube from the plane and I finally realised he was in charge of the jumper leads. We taxied to the edge of the tarmac and paused as a pace car screamed the full length of the runway as a final safety test, then the pilot moved us to the starting grid on perfectly dry, black asphalt bordered by 10cm walls of snow.

As we turned to start the take off run I could see perhaps 100m down the track. The terminal building was a shrouded hulk. The plane sat back on its haunches, seemingly desperate to pounce, as the driver simultaneously revved the engines mercilessly and held her tight with the brake. Then pounce she did. Racing like a dragster down the strip, past the terminal, off and up.

One second after take off we cleared the end of the runway.

Two seconds after take off aeroplanes still on the ground were outlined only by the drop shadow of bitumen beneath them where the snow blanket had not yet reached.

Three seconds after take off Stockholm was beginning to sleep under a doona of polar white.

Four seconds after take off we were engulfed.

For the next fifty minutes we were held in this cloud like a mosquito in amber. There was nothing to indicate movement. No dribbles trailing rearward across my window. No clouds flitting past. No vapour trail from the engine. No sign of sky above or earth below. Had I been deaf to the cabin noise and impervious to vibration I would not have know I was moving.

Then the plane dipped toward Växjö and we landed as if this were a summer day. Erling met me and we went to work. I was only seven months late.

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