



story **Symon Brando**

I shrug off the clucking of my family and make my way to International Departures. With the ticketing formalities over, we head to the bar and order drinks.

I sit and wait.

To escape. A wicked love gone horribly, horribly wrong. Sour times polyfill the cracks, forcing me to seek joy in sepia-youth: I look at Mam and Dad so beaming and proud and picture the last time I was here. The last time, all those years ago...

I was all of ten years old, sitting in

the Airport Bar, and there was a big crowd because it was Sunday and the place was always packed on Sundays. Not just travellers— it was the only pub open in Melbourne on our Day of Rest. The bar was decked out like a sleazy suburban beer-and-brawl-barn: purple skylights meshed with brown and yellow carpet, fake-wood panelling. God knows what new arrivals thought. But it was exciting for me because I was just a kid and we were at the airport and these people were all drunk and everyone seemed to be forging an incredible bond with each other, animatedly discussing the

cricket and Packer's Revolution.

"Wow, a revolution," I marvelled. "Here in Melbourne!"

And where were those planes going? They were all going somewhere and I was just a kid, just ten years old, imagining the Moon or Mars, the stars their destination.

Dad impatiently looked at his watch. Mam wiped my face with a spit-worn hankie. We were waiting for some long-forgotten cousin to arrive from the UK, another straggler from our far-flung clan. Dad had a Scotch on the rocks, Mam a shandy. I sucked on raspberry lemonade. Australia—our Australia—had a freckly innocence, an immature nation finding its feet.

A bloke at the next table introduced himself as 'Thommo': he gave me a wink and sang the South Melbourne footy club's theme song. Behind his back, his mate—'Bazza'—flashed the wanker sign at him, eyes rolling for my benefit. I giggled shyly.

Thommo and Bazza sported handle-bar moustaches and feather-cut hairdos.

Their women drank from 'ladies' glasses' and kept quiet; everyone knew their place. It was a sweet time and I savoured the moment, relishing the cartoon caricatures around me. My cousin and Mam and Dad faded into nothing because I knew that soon, all this would be mine. Life seemed impossibly easy, so neat. That's the myth of mateship, of male pride.

It's now.

Today.

Years later. I'm old and I smell the crackle of neon. The ugly ockers of my childhood have vanished, replaced by Aussie gold Olympians: Cuthbert, Landy, Ford. A gallery of sporting heroes adorning the walls of the bar, spirit of the '56 Olympics, touched up and sprinkled with stardust and Photoshop magic. Can technology proselytise the past? Can it invest these clapped-out icons

with a metallic sheen, to cover their dried-rot?

A wide-bodied jet rumbles into view. I stare in awe. The windows here are massive and I can see that it is a beautiful machine, a work of art. I trust it to deliver me to safety.

My mind's racing. I feel the lattice of power, underpinnings, strings that pull the puppets: Melbourne Airport's secret industry. What dramas are played out behind those white walls? Reinforced concrete, strong and able, houses the sub-structure through which electronics peep.

Luggage chutes reach for the skies, inclined upward to who knows where. And how many lives have been saved by last-gasp quarantine dumps? Suspended between Touchdown and Customs, old norms and new; last chance to ditch your contraband, all to be forgotten, as the flowers turn rotten and the plastic is old and grey.

Who speaks their own body language well enough to play the game?

Sweaty-palms-shaky-legs-versus-complex-surveillance-systems-count-the-hairs-on-your-mole:

*galactic eyes
sharper than a poison claw*

see into the beyond

Easy prey, the jet-lagged walk the gleaming chrome, resolving to greet the future head-on.

A flat, synthetic boarding call and I remember my trip: "Last call for Silverwing 501. Please make your way to Gate 23..."

There's just enough time for a piss. I head for the dunny.

The international pictogram for 'man' is suspended over the toilet door: straight-backed, featureless, brain-pan wiped clean. His partner, not ten metres away, is identical

except for two half-triangles on either side of her legs. *Some distinction!* Merged seamlessly with tomorrow, poor Bazza and Thommo never had a chance to evolve. No time. How humiliating for them to witness their wives sprouting careers, orgasms...

Even robots need love.

On my way to Check-In I pass a glass cabinet marked **QUARANTINE SEIZURES**, displays prohibited goods snatched from hapless voyagers:

[snake wine from Hong Kong]
[.22 calibre 'purse-guns' from Freedom, Wyoming]
[used opium pipes from Marrakesh]
['Harrods Dog Treats' from the Mother Cunt herself]

Next to this, a gaudily-lit ad selling Southbank Apartments— "opposite new Casino".

This airport is hyper-life, sniff-dogs pissed in the gene pool turn rabid on command. Robo-shotguns blast unattended luggage, a suspected bomb; hidden eyes spy digital ghosts, spool-and-replay eternal. There is a lack of overt 'heat'— where are the uniforms and sunglassed meat? They melt into light. Take one last look: flesh-and-blood for the dear, dying, departed. It's a system built on deception and shadow-play, set up to tame its own kind.

I don't know where this is going, anymore. Do you? Write to me, often... Write me.

Silverwing five-oh-one holding short of runway. I request start-up clearance. My initial route is London two-eight, via Bangkok.

Wind two-six-oh at one-two. Eight-oh knots. Vee-one.

Rotate.

Silverwing five-oh-one now climbing to six thousand feet. Change to one-one-nine point three. Autopilot engaged. ☐