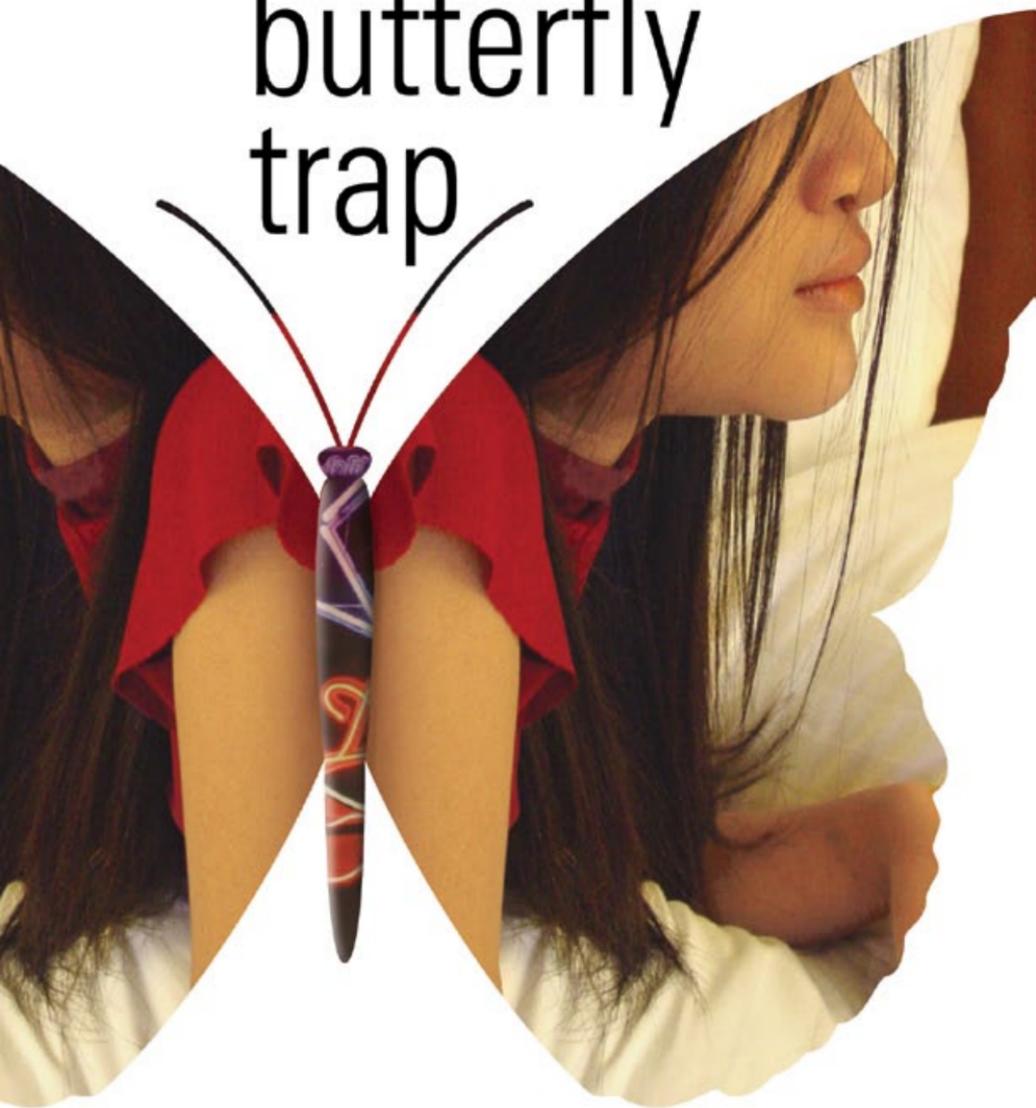


the a true story
butterfly
trap



What happens when a man becomes so consumed
chasing illusions that he loses touch with reality?
He gets *caught*, that's what.

dennis jon

the butterfly trap

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1 - Unknown Cargo

*In the sky, there is no distinction of east and west;
people create distinctions out of their own minds and then
believe them to be true.*

The first security guard checks my passport and boarding pass. The second checks it again and lays my bag flat on the conveyor belt. The third x-rays my belongings. The fourth stands by with a machine gun. The fifth waves an electronic wand over my body. Beep, beep, beep. I wish I'd taken my belt off. "Please step to the side, sir. Arms up. Legs spread. Lift your left foot, now the right. Remove your shoes. Remove your belt. Is this your bag? Open it. Fingernail files are not permitted in carry-on luggage. I'm going to need to confiscate this. Okay, you can go."

The sixth leads a German Shepard to sniff my luggage. The airline clerk at the gate calls my name for a random baggage check. The seventh security guard repeats the search routine of the fifth. I'm sure that someone feels safer because of this rigmarole, but a sharp pencil is deadlier than a fingernail file, and who says my water bottle isn't filled with napalm? I don't feel any safer; I just feel annoyed. Two more passport checks to get on the plane and the War on Terror is over. We lost.

The digital map on the seat back hypnotizes me into tranquility. Every pixel the plane icon moves is evidence of progress, though not many of us are progressing; the plane

is half empty. We pass Oregon, Washington, then Vancouver Island. I wait for the pilot to turn left and head across the Pacific, but he never does. I look at my ticket to make sure I'm on the right flight and then out the window at the Alaskan peninsula. Snow-capped mountains plunge into the icy waters of Bristol Bay.

I pick up my newspaper, as much to block the view of the vacant first class seats mocking me, as to read. If the point of this trip is to get away from reality, I may as well know what I'm fleeing. Among today's headlines: "More SARS Outbreaks in South East Asia" and "State Department Issues Terrorist Alert for Thailand." No wonder there's so many empty seats; all the worrywarts are staying home. Nowhere does it announce, "Divorced Man Runs Away."

Given the choice between stewing in the wreckage of divorce, dating my best friend's ex-wife, or the reverse evolution of the online personals, running away seemed a better choice. As if I'm flying away from my own reflection, freeing myself from my own identity. There's no reflection on the Pacific when the pilot announces the International Date Line. The ocean a blank slate as today becomes yesterday and we cross into tomorrow. It's the closest I'll ever get to time travel. I like the idea of going into the future and am already lamenting my imminent return to the past. But when today's gone, where does it go? And where does the big dufus in the red sports jersey think he's going?

He saunters into first class and slides into a leather recliner. He doesn't look the part: shaved head, sailor's earring, neck tattoo, baggy satin shorts, and plastic sandals with socks. A fashion statement no one wants to hear. What kind of jersey is that anyways? It has a big white 7 and says *Beckham* across his shoulders. The leather creaks as he leans

back and pretends to be asleep. Damn, that looks good. Maybe I should try it.

A passing flight attendant stops next to him, looks down, and then waves to someone at the front of the plane. She taps his shoulder. "Excuse me, sir." He keeps the charade up, but she doesn't buy it. "Excuse me, sir, I need to ask you to please return to your seat."

He opens his eyes and coos, "C'mon love, I's just getting comfortable."

He's English. Must be a soccer jersey.

"These seats are for paying first-class customers only, sir."

His attitude changes in a flash. "So the lot of *me* aren't good enough?"

"That's not what I'm saying, sir. It's airline policy..."

"Bollocks! This seat's empty, why can't I sit here?"

"Sir, please calm down, I don't want to make this difficult."

Beckham crosses his arms. "Then piss off. I'm not moving."

"Sir, the other passengers would appreciate it if you lowered your voice and returned to your seat."

"Tell the other passengers to kiss my hairy arse!"

The flight attendant shakes her head and strides toward the front of the plane. Beckham settles back into fictitious slumber—victorious—for the moment. He's got nerve, I'll give him that, but this battle isn't over. Reinforcements arrive in an officer's uniform. "What seems to be the problem here, sir?"

Beckham reverts to sweet-talk. "No problem guv'nor. Just catching a wee nap."

"Sir, I need you to return to your assigned seat, right now."

"I'm not going."

The pilot's eyes widen in disbelief. "I'd advise you to reconsider, sir."

"Or what? You going to boot me off? Huh?"

A hush falls over the plane, heads pop into the aisle to hear the response.

"No, sir. What I am going to do is return to the cockpit and do the job I was trained to do. And if Miss Scott reports to me that we have an unruly passenger on board who refuses to cooperate, that job entails notifying the airport police at our destination. They will also do their job, which means they will most likely detain the troublemaker for questioning, and quite possibly send him back to wherever he came from under police custody. Now if you'll excuse me I need to get back to the cockpit. Enjoy the rest of your flight, sir. Miss Scott, please report to me in five minutes."

The pilot walks toward the front of the plane and the flight attendant toward the back, but Beckham stays put. He's lost, and unless he's incredibly stupid, he'll know. He sits, and sits, and sits—then curls slowly out of leather luxury, and strolls back into livestock class. He disappears behind me and I'm sorry to see him go; if nothing else, he was entertaining.

The food-carts make the rounds and the anticipation of being fed settles the cabin down. I peel back the pre-fab meal's foil cover and try to figure out what it is. Two rows back a familiar voice says, "Ello, luv. What have we got here then?"

"Would you like a meal, sir?"

"It's about fookin' time. What are me choices then?"

"Your choices are yes, or no."

From thirty thousand feet, Japan looks just like California, only on the wrong side of the plane. From one

thousand feet, only the telephone poles look different. I've wanted to visit Japan since making origami swans in the third grade. I doubt I'll have a chance to leverage my paper-folding skills on this two-hour stopover, but I'm still excited to experience whatever bit of culture Narita International Airport can provide.

On the runway, the airport support vehicles look futuristic, or maybe just small. The ground staff wear neatly pressed uniforms and plastic helmets. The guy waving glow sticks has perfect posture. Everyone seems very serious: transporting luggage, driving buses, digging ditches, all with the urgency and precision of an aircraft carrier crew. Tora! Tora! Tora!

Down the escalator to connecting flights, a glass mural of dancing people doesn't look particularly Japanese; it could just as easily be in Cleveland or Des Moines. A young Japanese woman in a blue skirt holds a sign as if it was a game-show prize: *This bus to Terminal 2*. There isn't anywhere else to go, so I get on the bus. The driver follows the sweep of his wristwatch's second hand. At the appointed moment, he closes the door and drives off. Beckham runs out of the terminal. "Hold the bleedin' bus, Tugger." The driver pays him no mind, and we drive off without him. Japanese precision has its merits.

Terminal Two is a big shopping mall, and the shoppers are all Japanese. None have cameras. They are well-dressed, business men in business suits, women in well-coordinated ensembles, and retirees in track suits—a caricature of western style instead of kimonos. A shop girl arranges and rearranges a display of tourist knick-knacks. She notices my attention and flashes a bright smile. It catches me off guard, and I look away. I'm not used to strangers smiling at me, least of all attractive young women.

I head for the currency exchange with dollars in hand. Inside the glass booth, an elderly woman points to a small table behind me. "Fill form please." I wonder why I have to fill out a form to exchange twenty dollars, but I fill it out anyways.

A girl with a *Canada* backpack walks past me, taking my place in line. She says to the woman, "How many yen for one-thousand Singapore dollars?"

The woman behind the glass points to the table. "Fill form please."

Canada explains, "I don't want to change the money. I just want to know how many yen for one-thousand Singapore dollars."

"Fill form please."

I've already filled my form please and am ready to go, but Canada wants to try again, this time slower and louder. "How...many...yen...for...*one-thousand Singapore dollars?*"

The Japanese woman blinks, and then leans toward the glass. "Fill form please."

They stare at each other in confrontational silence. Canada waits for an answer, glass woman waits for her to leave, and I wait for the stalemate to break. A wiry supervisor pops up from his desk and walks toward the window. Canada launches into her speech. "How many yen..." He shakes his head and points to the table. Canada waves her arms in disgust. "I can't believe this."

I say, "I don't think they can understand you."

"You'd think these people would speak English."

"Well, this is Japan..."

"All I want..."

"Yeah, yeah, I know. Where are you from?"

"What?"

I point to her *Canada* patch, and say, "I have family in Canada. Where are you from?"

"Oh, that's just camouflage from terrorists. I'm from Chicago."

I memorize how to say "Eel over rice" in Japanese from the little sign next to the plastic-toy-food example in the display case and head for the cashier. I put a bottle of water on the counter and say, "Unagi don."

The spiky-haired teen behind the cash register shows me his calculator, and says, "One dollar, fifty cents".

I guess I didn't need yen after all, but the price is too low. He must think I just want the water, so I speak louder and with my best Japanese accent, "*Unagi don.*"

He looks at me as if I'm speaking a foreign language. I think he thinks I'm speaking English. We stare at each other in uncomfortable silence. I don't know how to tell him I'm speaking Japanese. I stop myself short from saying unagi don louder and say, "Eel?"

He nods quickly, punches the keys, and shows me a new price, still in dollars. I pull a couple of Nippon Ginko's finest from my wallet and say, "Yen?" He looks annoyed, recalculates, takes my order, my yen, and gives me a plastic number.

I find a seat at the end of the counter between a group of homely schoolgirls in blue pleated skirts and some German speaking backpackers. Why do backpackers, no matter where they're from or where they're going, always look the same? Tri-color knit caps, army surplus pants, beaded necklaces, too many bracelets, and something that says *Bob Marley* on it—the international uniform of traveling young rebels—

reflective of neither their origin nor destination.

Spike calls a number out. I don't know what it is. I only know how to count to four in Japanese, but I'm number eighty-seven. I head for the counter, leaving my carry-on behind—unattended—to save my place, less worried about it being stolen, or tampered with, than an over-zealous security guard confiscating it.

I admire the shiny glaze and sesame seeds briefly before digging in. The *Fraulein* Rastafarians hoist their heavy bags and something about their tone makes me think they're talking about me. When one taps my shoulder, I know it. "Scusen, you speck English?"

I swallow hard and nod that I do.

"Is smell vonderful, is fish?"

"It is wonderful, but I'm not sure if it's a fish."

"Vat is?"

"It's eel."

She translates for her friend, and they shudder at the thought of it. I hold the plastic plate up and say, "Would you like to try it?"

They shake their heads in unison. "Nein, nein, nein."

The next flight's passengers file on board: Japanese families with too much carry-on luggage, businessmen, retirees with a grandson, and an unusual number of goofy looking single men. A tall skinny guy with a bad perm and a slight limp, a big black guy in a light blue suit that doesn't quite fit, a fifty-ish man with two locks of black hair combed over his head and held in place by his glasses—all traveling alone.

The All Nippon Airways flight attendants are cute in their pin striped suits and pink shirt collars. All smiles as they hand