

CHAPTER 1

TROUBLES ON A PLANE

Adjusting to the arctic temperatures of Sweden, after leaving Australia's sweltering summer heat, was not easy. But I managed to acclimatise to these conditions very quickly. I had been sent to Sweden by the company I worked for to study the manufacturing methods and to learn about the PVC floor coverings that were produced there. This was to help me be more informed so that I could assist my clients back home. It was a steep, yet enjoyable, learning period.

Everything seemed so pleasant and fascinating during my stay in Sweden.

My days were filled with meeting interesting people and inspecting pioneering manufacturing technologies.

But what really impressed me was the cleanliness. From their vast factories, in which the floors were tiled in a light colour, and the workers wore white socks, white wooden clogs and even white dustcoats.

On the last evening before leaving for home, I was invited to attend a banquet in which I was given an opportunity to thank everybody from the parent company, for their kindness and hospitality.

Normally I would have been looking forward to such an event, but the newspapers had been reporting on a new kind of flu epidemic that was expected to spread all over Europe. It had started in England, where the first cases were already being treated in the hospitals.

This news alarmed me as I wanted to return to Australia in a healthy state so I could resume my job, as I was the company's only Australian representative, covering the Victorian, Tasmanian and the Riverina areas of New South Wales, I could not afford to be sick, as there was

no-one who could call on my customers.

The banquet was a glittering affair and the people were very amiable. I had the Swedish company official at my side during the entire evening; he kept introducing me to people and translated conversations, whenever this was necessary, but I found that most people I spoke to have a good command of the English language, albeit with a lovely Swedish lilt, and it was a pleasure to converse with them.

‘Please meet Mrs Sorensen, our Interior design consultant’ Sven, the interpreter, said with a magnanimous gesture towards a very tall and attractive lady. Elegant in her winter dress, blond hair and blue-eyes, and with a warm smile, she extended her hand.

‘How nice to finally meet you, Peter.’ Her English was perfect with only a slight accent, which made it sound more attractive.

‘My husband just came back from England yesterday, there is such an awful flu going round there, everybody is so very sick, it is absolutely dreadful!’

Horrified, I tried to extricate my hand from hers but it was too late! It was a long and welcoming handshake, too long for my comfort, and when I finally withdrew my hand, I furiously rubbed it against the side of my suit whilst trying to hold my smile and keep the conversation going.

But it was too late! On my flight from Stockholm to Vienna, where I had to catch my connecting flight to Australia, I started to feel the beginning strains of flu. And by the time I reached Vienna, I was sweating profusely, my body had uncontrollable shakes, and I had started vomiting. I advised the airline of my state of health, but still agreed to accept me as passenger, regardless of my state of health. “If I can only arrive in Melbourne alive, I’ll be all right!” I kept saying to myself.

Before I left on the flight home, I obtained some medicine from the local doctor to try and help stabilise my increasingly troublesome stomach.

I can't remember how I got on the plane, but I slumped into an aisle seat near the toilets, with a plastic water bottle in my hands. As the long-lasting cramps shook my body. I searched desperately for my medication that I had slid into the pouch of the seat in front of me for easy access.

I did not realise that by inserting my hands into the pouch, I was actually moving my fingers in the seat of the person in front of me. She was a tall and thin lady, a kind of school-Marm type, and when she felt my fingers moving around on her seat, her posture stiffened in exercised control and you could hear her threateningly drum her finger nails on the little plastic tray in front of her.

A man observed all this across the aisle from her; he bent towards me and with an Australian accent whispered,

'Hey, are you're searching for something in that pocket?' and then added, 'You have your fingers on her arse...' lifting his plastic cup of beer in approval, smiling encouraging at me, obviously meaning well.

This revelation came as a shock, even in my foggy state, and quickly jerked my hands out of the pouch. I heaved myself out of my seat, pale, and with unsteady and slurred speech, I mumbled an apology to the stern looking lady.

Looking up at my glassy eyes, her face betrayed her thoughts. She did not believe a word I was babbling and, judging from her body language, she would have slapped my face had I not stopped my 'lustful groping'.

Thinking the worst was over, on one of my many trips to the toilet, I heard a banging on the door and muffled

voices shout to the flight attendant that there had been a man in there for quite a while and that he may have fainted...

Suddenly, the locked door was ripped open with many arms reaching inside and grabbing me, and then dumped me back into my aisle seat like a sack of potatoes, leaving me sitting there on my own.

The passengers on the flight had their own little bit of theatre, and I suppose any diversion or entertainment is always welcome on the long flight back to Australia.