

Life Starts Now

30 June, Barcelona airport. The hottest day of the year at 42 degrees. The handover took place outside of the terminal building, discreetly enough given the volume of travellers making their way inside. We walked quickly through the open doors, the drop in temperature welcome. Heading into quieter corridors, unfamiliar to regular travellers, we made our way towards the boarding area. Officials making a final cursory check of passports and paperwork before entering the plane.

A question from one of my traveling companions, a man of about fifty-five years, overweight, beads of sweat on his forehead.

"You do want to go don't you?"

I nodded confirmation.

"No fuss then, head straight to the back, you have the window seat."

He spoke with the self-assured confidence of someone who had flown under these circumstances many times before.

The seat was cool and welcoming as I relaxed into it. My heartbeat slowing now I was safely aboard. It was already 14:15 local time. Other passengers arrived and

there was the usual bustle and movement of people finding their seats, storing luggage and settling for the journey.

Sat at the back we looked like any typical group of business passengers, weary but alert after a few days of international negotiations. To my right sat two females, smartly dresses in sharp suits, iPad on laps, one doing a Sudoku the other catching up on an episode of Dr Who. Richard, who had spoken earlier, was seated in front of us on the end of the aisle.

I angled my body to get the best view out of the window. A heat haze was rising from the tarmac. After a seemingly long delay the announcement I had been waiting for, imminent take-off. Tears rose in my eyes as the engines roared to life. It wasn't for fear of flying, but rather a release of tension after months of waiting for this moment.

The plane flew low over the salt marshes of Hospitalet Llobregat, and then banked left and started to climb. Barcelona came into view. The sights all so familiar, Villa Olympia and the Port where I had first lived when arriving in the city, the square grid streets of the L'Eixample and La Sagrada Familia, the huge monstrosity of a cathedral near my last home, which attracted tourists by the bus loads. So many memories passing as rapidly through my mind as the ground below. I needed to keep a check on my emotions, don't break down here.

The aeroplane banked again and the views changed to more open landscape. We ascended through the clouds. I gazed in awe at the wonder of the plumes rising upwards from the cumulous cloud base. The sky, Mediterranean blue I had become so familiar with.

The small tv screen in front of me was plotting our flight route. We were now over the Pyrenes. Driving through this area many years ago, watching the temperature gauge on the car rise as we travelled south through France into Spain, I had felt a lot less optimistic about my future than I did today.

The refreshment trolley made its inevitable appearance. A welcome interruption now that we had settled into the flight.

"Drink madam?" the attendant questioned me politely. Was she aware of our purpose for travelling I wondered?

Richard ordered for us all. Then we settled once again into the amiable silence of travelling companions.

The descent began over northern France. Clouds below us became greyer in appearance. Then my first sight of the emerald fields of England. What joy I felt in seeing the colours after the scorched, dusty ground of Barcelona. Lower again and the Thames came into view. We seemed to be flying along the river as if on a tourist

trip – the London Eye, Houses of Parliament, the bridges – what a welcome sight to someone as homesick as myself. Next a cricket club with tiny figures in perfect detail. Rooftops close enough to touch, then the feeling of wheels on home turf after so long in exile.

We waited until all other passengers had alighted then made our way to the exit. More unmarked corridors, hospital-like in their starkness. Outside the cool air and strong breeze a shock to my senses. A white mini-bus was waiting for us, engine running. Once on board I pulled on a jersey, unthinkable only a few hours earlier.

Travelling to our destination my three companions chatted with the driver and two other passengers. One had a strong Geordie accent, "pathetic" his repeated and only response to every element of work related discussion. I listened, smiling inwardly, to the sounds of true English speaking voices from all over the country. So different to the stilted English of those I'd taught abroad.

Twenty minutes later and we were almost at our destination. Left past a small housing development, newsagent on the corner, then right and the buildings came into view.

My travel bag was carried into reception by Richard as I followed close behind. Too full of emotion to talk I walked silently behind.

A brief exchange of greetings, paperwork handed over and the departing words,

"Enjoy your 2816 days!" from the northern male.

Regardless of how many days and years I have to serve in this prison, life for me starts now, and I'm going to make the most of it.