

Paradise's end

1.

“Great success comes to those who try first, and you have the privilege now of being one of the first. If you bring your attention to page 20 of our portfolio you will see that by acquiring ‘Fast-Account’ as a service 85% of our customers experienced a growth of at least 25% in the first quarter and 50 in the next.” ... or was it 60% percent? Tom wasn’t sure. Oh well, it was all written down in the plastic binder he had in his bag in the luggage compartment. He wasn’t worried. After all he had done this many, many times now. Around 7,650 if he remembered correct. He had it written down on a small post-card in his checked in laptop bag up above his head. Every time he went somewhere to make a sale for one company or another, he would purchase a post-card from a souvenir shop and write down a miniature statistic of his life so far:

- 254,844 coffees drank
- 567,877 miles traveled
- 14 suitcases dragged around and torn
- 675 unique hotels stayed in
- ...

And on and on. It was his life, or more specifically the measurable part of his life. The day-to-day mundane tasks of a traveling salesman. He had a family, with a wife who was expecting, and he loved them dearly, but he also loved his job. He loved to travel, rarely attributing any importance to the destination. It was the act of travel that really enjoyed his attention. Midflight the destination was a point of wonder, where anything was possible and what was passing by the windows and left behind was swollen by the hum of the motor and, for all he cared, oblivion. He liked to travel because it was a moment of presence, where past, future and now can be examined independently from the jumbled form they took during day-to-day life. It was a form of meditation for Tom, a Zen Garden, wrapped by the white noise of the engines, the crackle of plastic bottles, and cups and the chatter of the stewardesses handing them out.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please fasten your seat belts and lock your trays in position! Shortly we will be landing at Frankfurt airport! Once again from the captain and the crew, we hope you enjoyed flying with us and we hope to see you back again on Paradise’s end.”

15 minutes later and the plane was cruising down the runway towards the terminal. Another 10 and it was docked to the gate. Like most professional salesman Tom traveled light. A small backpack to hold his computer, documents, chargers for his phone and PC, and other small items. Everything else he had was with his other small carry-on suitcase. The suitcase contained a second navy-blue suite (besides the brown one he was traveling with), 2 pairs of socks, underwear and tank tops, toothbrush with a travel toothpaste, an electric razor, some hidden cash just in case, toiletries and some company material he didn’t need to read during the flight. Besides this the suitcase was equipped with an inbuilt

800 Amp battery and a foldable seat. It was a birthday present from his wife which he thoroughly enjoyed.

The seat belt sign went off, he rose up and gathered his stuff. As he got everything ready, he straightened his jacket and started towards the front exit.

“Good afternoon Mr. Heidecker! Good to see you again. Was everything to your enjoyment during our flight?” Inquired the stewardess at the door with a smile.

“We are happy to hear it Mr. Heidecker! As we say in Paradise’s End ‘*It’s the Journey, as well as the Destination*’”

“That’s a great slogan” He said with a smile.

In that last moment though, just before he was about to fully turn towards the plane door and exit, he thought he saw something strange on the stewardess’ face. Just for a second it looked like there was light radiating from all around her and that the pupils of her eyes had disappeared, and only white orbs remained. It was certainly an unnerving image and Tom had to do a quick double take to make sure he wasn’t losing his mind, but only the reassuring image of the tall young woman smiling back at him remained. He caught himself staring, shrugged it off as a trick of the light and carried on through the gate.

2.

The airport was massive. It covered 35,000 acres of land area with three terminals to serve its innumerable passengers. The airport was so large in fact, that each flight information panel had an additional column to list the time it took to arrive at the gate of the corresponding flight from the current location of the board. Many reports are filed each year of passengers stranded at the terminal due to miscalculations of the distance between connecting gates at the terminal, or due to “short” snack/coffee breaks meanwhile self-assuringly saying to yourself “Oh no, no need to rush. there’s loads of time!” As an instinctive reaction Tom disliked these kinds of people, he found something selfish in this way of operating, but as a salesperson, this was a belief he kept to himself.

Unlike them, Tom did actually have some time. There were 3 more hours until his next flight, it was early morning, so he decided to make the best of it and go get breakfast. There was a great little café right next to his connecting gate so on he strolled with his luggage through the long corridors of the Terminal.

Long stretching corridors of gates, each one leading to its own distinct little world at any given time made the skeleton of the airport. At the end of these hallways were positioned small islands of overpriced food and beverage stalls, as well as restrooms. They were usually in the form of a semi-circle if near an exterior wall, this way they would connect to one or two other gateways, or in a complete circle in some more central locations which would then connect to four or five other corridors or even other plazas, much like airports connect between each other. The corridors themselves were noting exciting, covered in a teal ruff plastic carpet on the floor and multiple evenly spaced blue grey columns for support. Evenly spaced between each column were the gates of the corridor, all equal in appearance, tall square, made of black marble with a glass sliding door to block entrance when not in use. In front of each one there were about two roles of chairs with around twenty chairs per row, evenly spaced with a small table stretching out between every two chairs and.... “Black marble?” Tom thought and halted in the middle of the walkway.

Tom turned to face one of the gates. He approached the entrance and examined it closely. Yes, indeed it appeared to be marble or some other kind of smoothed stone. Tom gave it a touch with his hand, but all he could feel was the coolness of the rock as well as its smooth texture. Examining it more closely he could see small veins of violet-gold type of substance within the stone. He took a step back and looked at the whole scene. There certainly wasn't anything wrong with having marble doorways however in the current context they just seemed odd. Reaching back into his mind he tried to remember other airports and he could clearly recall those blocky things always being made from some kind of hardened plastic or metal. He tilted his head to one side, then the other trying to maybe see if it wasn't some illusion of the light, a few seconds later he just shrugged it off and continued on his way. "Maybe they were remodeling" he thought walking by.

Fifteen minutes later he was in food court close to his gate. It was a small one with a long bar as the main sitting area and a couple more tables close by. Tom took a seat at one corner of the bar and ordered a coffee with milk and two croissants. If there was one pastry, he loved the most this was it. And this place had the best in the airport. They imported the dough from the outside, but they baked them here which kept them nice and soft and they went great with the coffee. While eating tom was going through the binder that used to be in his luggage, rehearsing the basic facts of the 'Fast-Account' service. It was a standard portfolio with a lot of graphs and a lot of numbers basically saying the same thing "Buy our products and your numbers will go up as well!". Oh well at least he will get to see New York. His company had provided him with a nice room in a hotel in Manhattan for an entire week, even though the sales meetings he had planned were only three days. But the next flight after was in two days so Tom secured himself a nice mini vacation. While attempting to visualize the wonderful time he would have there, another passenger took the chair to his right. It was a heavy fellow, in his early thirties.

"Can I get a big cup of coffee, black?" He asked a bit groggy "No, no nothing else, thank you! Please make it to go, the wife's waiting for me."

The waitress gave him the cup, and he took a small sip and kept his nose over it with his eyes closed as if it were a healing salve.

"Been traveling long?" inquired Tom.

"10 hours now!" exclaimed the stranger "Me and my wife are going down to the Canneries, for our honeymoon."

"Congratulations!" exclaimed Tom

"Thanks! Funny thing is I could've sworn that everyone there was also going for their honeymoon too." he said with a laugh "Everyone was holding hands, snuggled up next to each other with that dumb look on their faces, you know looking forward and up but not at anything in particular. Hell, looking is not even the correct term, it implies too much presence. All of them were absorbed in their own little world, building a future that will never come to be. Hell, so are we!"

With that he took the cup from the barista, nodded in gratitude and slurped a big chug of his drink rising up. "Anyway, have a good flight mister!"

"Thanks, you too!"

"I'm sure we will!" And with that he started back through the corridor Tom had just came through.

Tom had a look around. It was the regular airport lounge and food area he had always known. Well not this one particularly but once you've seen one you've seen them all pretty much. The crowd in

front was the usual bunch. You had your middle-aged casual tourists, some with kids some without, you could distinguish them by the level of relaxedness as expressed by their face. For some reason they were always either underdressed or overdressed for the weather of their destination. Then you had your backpackers, young adults under-prepared for wherever they were planning to go although that was part of the fun for them. Seniors, in a group going someplace warm. There were the suits dressed much like him and carrying the same equipment. Slim, compact, all in order to be as efficient and as fast as possible.

“All passengers heading to La Guardia airport, please head to gate G17. Boarding is about to commence.”

And with that Tom picked up his things and went back through the corridor. Passing through the marble gate G17 he did feel a strange warmth passing through his body

3.

30 minutes later and the plane was slowly moving down the runway, preparing to take off. It was a surprisingly empty flight for a transcontinental journey. Looking around he could maybe make out 20 maybe 30 people on his level. Of course, he was flying business class, so it was a bit hard to see between the different sections, but still even in business class there was only one other person. Strangely enough that person was also wearing what appeared to be a flight captain’s uniform. He was casually sipping coffee while reading the newspaper.

“Ok, well it seems it’s going to be a quiet flight” Tom thought.

“Prepare for takeoff.” Sounded on the intercom.

Tom braced himself for the take-off. The plane gathered more and more speed as it was heading down the runway. The cabin started to shake and rattle from the wind resistance. The engines were booming from the outside.

It was a weird experience for Tom. It was as if Time and Space had halted. It was impossible to describe, with words or any other means of communications, since any action or predicate that implied continuity wasn’t possible. It was a completely dark, cold space. And he was just existing there for what felt a long time. But then suddenly a blast of light hit him and blinded him. After some time, he came back to it and found himself on the floor.

“Oh dear, he must have gotten misaligned again”

“Well, if he has the next couple of moments will be a shocker”

Tom slowly opened his eyes. What he saw made his heart bounce all the way up to his throat. In front of him appeared to be the figures of a couple of flight attendants and a pilot. But that conclusion could only be drawn from the uniform that they were wearing. Loose parts where tissue should have shown and the familiar extremities of hands, feet and head should have now taken the shape of beams of light. The beams themselves still took the form of the extremities so it made the figures appear humanoid in silhouette, but they were anything but.

“Now Mr. Heidecker, please don’t panic! Everything is alright and you are perfectly safe...”

The next thing that Tom did was based on pure survival instinct. Now what he meant to do was jump and rush past the alarming forms, however, being still disorientated from the previous experience, what he did was launch himself straight up with such speed and force that he inadvertently met his head with the passenger panel above his seat. Pitch blackness set in and he fell down on the floor again.

“Oh dear!” Said one of the flight attendant forms.

The cabin was filled with echoes of the beeping signal for passenger assistance which was accidentally activated by Tom’s head during his escape attempt.

4.

"AH!" yelled Tom and reached for the back of his head.

Expecting to find a wound or a big bump he was surprised at finding nothing at all. In fact, besides that momentary initial shock now there was no pain as well. He slowly opened his eyes and expecting to find himself back on the airplane, he was now in bed, in what appeared to be, his very own bedroom. Then a knock on the door rang through the room.

"Yes? Who is it?" he answered.

The door slung open and in came the captain of the plane from before. He looked at Tom but remained at the frame of the door. Tom launched himself up in a sitting position but still under the covers of the bed.

"Please, Mr. Heidecker don't be alarmed. I am not here to hurt you. How are you feeling? How is your head? There shouldn't be any damage or pain, but you may feel a bit err... peculiar for some time while you align yourself again."

"Who are you? Why am I in... in my bedroom... I think?" asked Tom confused.

"Do not worry, everything will be explained. How are you feeling?"

"I feel fine. What's going on?"

"We were thinking of leaving you on the plain and let everything appear as a momentary hallucination, but... sooner or later it will happen again, so might as well get through it."

"Again? What do you mean? What is going on? Have I gone insane?" Exclaimed Tom, lifting himself off the bed.

"Ha-ha, no no Mr. Heidecker, you are perfectly fine mentally, in fact you are here based on your own choice. It always has and will be. Please follow me, let's go for a walk, I'll explain everything meanwhile."

The captain moved back from the frame of the door and extended his hand with an open palm pointing outside of the room, welcoming Tom to go with him. Tom was hesitant to follow, but it didn't seem like he had control over the situation, plus strangely enough he didn't seem afraid of the man or the situation. He jumped out of bed hesitantly and went through the door, followed behind by the captain.

As soon as he went through the door, he suddenly found himself in the airport again, he looked back and the only thing he could see was one of the airport gates from before. The only thing he felt was a strange hum coming from the monolith gate.

"You know there's been more than 100 billion of you so far, it's crazy hard managing the place. Of course, not all of you stay, and not all of you belong specifically here either, but the numbers are increasing each year. We already have to make some tricks so that we can fit you all on a plane. Coffee?" asked the captain. They were Infront of the coffee kiosk from before.

"No, thank you" replied Tom "Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"But of course! You are dead Mr. Heidecker" he replied casually while taking a seat at the bar.

"I'm what?"

"Yes! You heard me right. I apologize for the bluntness but from experience most people handle it pretty well actually. Well, they don't really realize what it all means to be dead, but no one starts crying or making a scene or anything"

"But, but then where..."

"Where are you? I guess you are tempted to use words like heaven or hell, but the truth is much more economical than that. But I guess for all intents and purposes we can stick to using the word afterlife which is dubious but more accurate."

"So, the afterlife is just one big airport?"

"In a sense yes. Well for you and many other people it is. For some it's a buss depo, for others it's a highway stop or even just a plain old park for some. The place itself is not the important part it's more what lies beyond." The captain took a sip of coffee and continued. "Tell me Mr. Heidecker how

do you imagine heaven like, is it just one big never-ending sky where people wear togas and hang out on clouds all day drinking wine and eating grapes?" He asked with a smile.

"We I don't really know but I was expecting something a little bit more exciting than a plain old airport I guess."

"Ah but you see it's both the journey and the destination that make the experience that much more special. Please humor me in this, could you describe a truly happy memory of yours. Let me help you, perhaps you can tell me about the birth of your daughter."

"Yes, well I was in Chicago at the time on a business meeting and right in the middle of it I received a page from my wife with big bold letters "BABY INCOMING", I almost tripped on the stairs running out from the building. Then I took the first flight back to New York and was a nervous wreck while waiting to land and in the taxi on the way to the hospital. But once I arrived and held my first child I almost broke down crying" Tom responded with a smile.

"Indeed, it is one of your happiest memories. What if I told you that the plane you were on was taking you to that same meeting in New York in 1987."

Tom looked at him dumbfoundedly.

"But how could that be?"

Tom took a second to recall the events leading up to this and upon close reflection he acknowledged internally that the captain was right. His head was spinning in circles.

"It is part of the restart process; don't worry you will be ok in some time. And it shall come to pass many times more. You see Mr. Heidecker we all make our own versions of Heaven by being and existing. It is the stories that we collect along the way and the ones that persist in our mind and that become cornerstones of the being that persist afterwards."

"But I don't understand what about this airport?"

"It is merely a tool to connect between them"

"But why?"

'Well, to answer that you have to reflect a little more on the life you've had and the events that are tied together here from there. If we go back to the memory of the birth of your child again for a second, could you try and conceptualize the emotions that you were feeling?"

"Well..." said Tom and furrowed his eyebrows "I was really worried until I reached them, because I wasn't sure what had happened. But then once I opened the door and saw her holding my daughter and that they were both OK, it was an intense feeling of euphoria that came over me, an intense beam of positive energy shot up through my body and it was all directed at them, at that moment." He was smiling as he was talking.

"Precisely, Tom" replied the captain "Precisely. It is that overwhelming awareness of presence that makes the moment true, which your soul carries here. And it is precisely the buildup leading up to it that intensifies the culmination of the experience and it is that which we strive to replicate here. The dullness and suspense that leads to these moments. No one really cares to relive their whole life again, so we break it down here into small packages that include the whole emotional experience. And mind you it's not all positive memories that cross over. We could let you experience it all if that is what you'd like each moment one right after the other as if looking through a 4D album, however, rarely does anyone choose that."

"So, then I am forced to do this, stay here... forever?"

"Yes and no, you see no one is here against their choice."

"Well, I don't remember signing up for this."

"No-no you would not it's part of the process. That is why we're here. It was no accident the things you saw today."

"So, you intended for this. That is why you were on the plane with me?"

"I was close just in case yes, but I didn't know when it would happen. You were given free will upon creation and you inherit the same free will upon passing on. We don't want to keep you here if

you don't want to, so upon starting this "journey" we give you a spark shall we call it, that keeps on growing inside you allowing you to slowly start seeing things from our world. And when that happens... well we discuss new terms if you so desire."

"Like, what?"

"Well, anything really, we can put you in the clouds if you wish, with the toga, wine and grapes. You can go on new adventures; explore places you could not see while alive. Or if you so wish you can simply disappear, some choose that too. But we found that most come back here. Of course, you can take as much time as you'd like to think it over."

"What about my wife and my child?"

"They are here too. Now-now, don't worry They all made it to a ripe old age before passing. Time functions a little differently here. I assume you'd want to see them, unfortunately it is almost impossible, it is not us who build the journey you experience here. Soo Mr. Heidecker... what shall it be? How do you wish to proceed?"

5.

"Great success comes to those who try first gentlemen, and you have the privilege now of being one of the first. Let me tell you, -No show you! If you bring your attention to page 20 of our portfolio you will see that by acquiring 'Fast-Account' as a service 85% of our customers experienced a growth of at least 25% in the first quarter and 50 in the next. In the fiscal years after that..." Tom felt a slight buzzing around his belt area. He reached down to his pager and glanced at the screen, with big bold letters there were the words "BABY INCOMING".