

Checking In the Baggage: Self-Acceptance through Escapism

Prologue: I Was the Carry On.

Blue. Green. Pink. Red. Orange. And a whole lot of dusty brown.

Don't wear white in Marrakesh. It'll turn beige within the hour.

That was lesson number one.

The first of many waiting for me somewhere inside the labyrinthine arteries of the Medina: Marrakesh's beating heart, circus arena and sensory assaulter all at once. Art. Motorbike smoke. Riads hidden behind anonymous doors. Tajin bubbling beneath conical lids. Mint tea poured theatrically from impossible heights. Spices stacked proudly in pyramids like edible architecture.

When the Uber screeched to a stop and the driver barked some frantic hybrid of Arabic and French for me to get out before the local cab drivers noticed him charging "non-local prices," I tightened the straps of my overstuffed backpack and stepped into the Medina.

Noise first.

Then scent.

Then movement.

The vendors yelled, bargained and sang in four languages simultaneously. Donkeys dragged carts through giant wooden gates. Men carried trays of bread above their heads like balancing acts. French tourists floated through the chaos dressed in linen and inherited wealth. For all I knew, I could've been in Paris if Paris had sunlight, spice and a long-complicated relationship with colonialism. Oh, wait, it does, at least that last one.

We'll revisit that thought later.

Here I was in Marrakesh, burnt out, curious and strangely hopeful before the blank face of a city I could suddenly touch, smell, taste and hear. The city itself vibrated with color. Men and women moved through the streets draped in striped robes and flowing fabrics, every corner alive with motion and emotion.

This was March 2025.

And for once, I felt capable of matching that vibrancy.

But the road to getting here — literally and psychologically — had not always looked this bright. My relationship with travel had not begun in cinematic sepia tones or Instagram sunsets. It began with clinical depression and an eight-hour layover at Hamad International Airport in Doha, Qatar.

October 2021.

My first solo trip.

I built myself a bed out of four brown leather airport seats while the metal armrests dug into my ribs and knees. Frazier's *Cold Mountain* sat unopened beneath my head like an intellectual pillow. Adele's *Easy on Me* looped through a pair of exhausted wired headphones for eight consecutive hours.

Destination: Istanbul, Turkey.

Departure Time: 8:40 AM.

Mental State: fucked.

The Hamad Airport PA system became my only companion that night. I was twenty-seven years old, emotionally immature, pretending to sleep beneath the giant yellow **Gate C3** sign while internally collapsing in slow motion.

To keep things honest, here's an excerpt from one of the many notebook entries scattered throughout this book.¹ The notes remain exactly as they were written: messy grammar, dramatic spirals, overthinking and all. Travel stripped me down repeatedly, and it feels dishonest to clean up the evidence when I present it to you.

"I feel eroded and I feel like I'm losing my mind, losing control, losing any ability to feel joy. My body and mind don't feel like the body and mind I know. I feel betrayed and they feel fixated on bad thoughts and topics. Who the fuck is this sad on vacation? I really am

¹ Refer to the Appendix (Letter A) for the written text.

trying to fight it. I'm aiming for better and I know I'll get it. But for now this ebb and flow of the mood are truly starting to make me feel ill in the mind, spirit, body and tangible reality. I've always wanted to be something. I've listed down the traits and characteristics that I'd like to be. I had a very clear idea of who I want to be and who I am. Even in writing this, I feel excessively dramatic. I feel like when I read it, my real self would congratulate me for having the courage to speak of this but also be like, 'Come on. Get your shit together and do what needs to be done.' Why have I always been the guy that overthinks his presence when we're supposed to be having a great time? Why have I psychoanalyzed myself when I'm at the club? Why do I always worry if I'm embarrassing when I speak? Why can't I just enjoy the moment for what it is? Why can't I absorb experiences and enjoy myself? Why does everything have to feel tainted?"

Not exactly vibrant, huh?

And the irony was that I wrote those words at Istanbul's **Craft Beer Lab** with six untouched half-pints of craft beer sweating in front of me beneath warm industrial lighting. Men in dark coats and polished shoes laughed loudly nearby. Women moved through the room trailing perfume, lipstick and intimidating confidence. The atmosphere dripped with texture and flavor.

I retained almost none of it.

All I could focus on was my sad sod self.

Allow me to present my inability to stop focusing on myself.

I left the bar and walked for four hours.

The Bosphorus stretched beside me, dark and endless, carrying the reflected lights of tourist boats across its surface like glitter smeared by a toddler. To my right, traffic surged through the city while beautifully dressed people kissed, smoked, argued and laughed against the violent autumn wind.

I posted photos.

People replied to my Instagram stories with variations of:

Living your best life.

Crazy vacation bro.

Take me with you.

None of them knew it was a cry for help disguised as tourism.

I kept walking.

And looking back now, I realize something almost painfully obvious: the solution had already surrounded me.

Everything outside of me was in motion. Ferries crossed continents. Couples argued then reconciled. Cats climbed mosque stairs. Water moved. Wind moved. Cities moved. Meanwhile, I remained psychologically frozen, gripping my own self-consciousness like a passport I was terrified to lose.

What I was unknowingly chasing across airports and borders was not escape.

It was self-acceptance. And I was paralyzed.

*

“There was no charm until the rain started pouring.

I felt its presence so solid, so gritty and concrete, ordinary life was pouring.

Then, the water arrived and the city gained some emotion.

Its people were kind, smiles everywhere and romantic, but not dramatic, constant motion.

I like it here, it’s stable & looks nice.”

That little pseudo-poem came about during a toronne break at the end of my week in Milan.

February 2024.²

² Refer to Appendix (Letter C) for the written text.

Truthfully, I didn't particularly enjoy Milan outside of that rainy afternoon. The city moved too quickly for me, all sharp tailoring and espresso urgency. But I loved the people. Their Mediterranean softness. The way they ordered coffee standing at the bar, drank it in three sips and continued with their day gesturing their way through a conversation.

Milan was also where the fantasy of permanently leaving Kuwait first began taking shape in my mind.

I remember jogging through the rain across the Duomo square and realizing that my obsession with travel had less to do with adventure and more to do with belonging. Somewhere along the line, I had replaced the stability of home with airplane seats, hostel check-ins and temporary identities assembled between passport stamps.

I understood then that I was searching for something much larger than movement itself.

Though I wouldn't fully understand what until later.

Kindness.

One night in Milan, I went out with a man named Stefano.³

He was fifty-five.

I was twenty-nine.

He wore a thick white shirt with a deep green tie. I arrived in sweatpants and a North Face thermal jacket looking like some dick that's unqualified for adulthood.

Over house wine, cacio e pepe and zucchini lasagna, Stefano told me he had spent twenty-five years working at the same accounting firm. After taxes, he earned around 2,500 Euros a month.

Twenty-five years.

Half the salary of some twenty-something Gulf corporate employee with a decent resume template.

Suddenly, my romantic fantasies of fleeing Kuwait dissolved beneath shaved parmesan and economic reality.

I never saw Stefano again. But he still follows me on LinkedIn.

*

London, meanwhile, taught me that every major city eventually reveals the same exhausted face underneath its glamour.

During my last trip there in June 2024, I spent an alarming amount of time riding the tube watching people stare silently at the faded blue fabric opposite them like emotionally depleted commuters awaiting release from modern existence itself.

That's the thing about London: it seduces you and exhausts you simultaneously.

My first night there, I blacked out with two friends I had met during previous travels in Istanbul and Austria. By the end of the evening, we had also collected:

- a French artist,
- and a recently engaged German couple.

Travel does that. Strangers temporarily become central characters in your life with alarming speed.

By 2AM we were back at an apartment overlooking Prince's Square Gardens, passing around bottles of beer and rosé while politics, immigration, loneliness and inflation drifted through the room in increasingly drunken tones.

Two people were Oxford graduates.

The French girl had just moved to London.

The German couple leaned aggressively conservative.

Eventually the conversation landed on the reality of modern city life:

poverty,

housing,

immigration,

burnout,

loneliness.

Everyone seemed exhausted in different accents.

And sitting there slightly drunk with an IPA bottle warming in my hand, I realized something deeply unromantic but strangely comforting: our anxieties were global.

No city was coming to save us.

Not London.

Not Milan.

Not Barcelona.

Not Bangkok.

Wherever you go, you arrive there too.

And unfortunately, you are often the heaviest thing in your luggage.

Still, stark realities never discouraged me from moving.

Because somewhere between airport terminals, hostel bunk beds and blurry train windows, I discovered that travel is not really about escape. It's about exposure. Exposure to other people's ways of living. Exposure to your own emotional architecture once unfamiliar distractions disappear.

And despite everything, the anxiety, the spiraling thoughts, the self-consciousness, beauty kept interrupting me.

It interrupted me at Musée D'Orsay while standing in front of Van Gogh's **Starry Night** with tourists whispering around me like fanatic churchgoers. It interrupted me through the taste of Pad Thai erupting from Jay Fai's flaming wok in Bangkok. It interrupted me inside Indonesian hostels where strangers from every corner of the earth became temporary family over cigarettes, cheap beer and existential conversations at 3AM.

Travel kept insisting on life even when I struggled to.

But movement also did something else.

It forced me face-to-face with my baggage.

Not the 40L backpack slung over my shoulders.

Not the Zuhair Murad tote tucked beneath airplane seats.

The invisible baggage.

The kind that passes silently through airport security and follows you across borders undetected until one random afternoon you're standing inside Istanbul's Grand Bazaar smiling at piles of dates stuffed with walnuts before suddenly breaking down in tears beside the grave of an Ottoman Sultan who absolutely did not ask to witness some Lebanese guy emotionally collapsing beside his centuries-old resting place.

The baggage opens unexpectedly.

And once it does, you lose rhythm entirely.

Backpacking stops becoming a forward journey and starts becoming an excavation into the hidden machinery of your mind: your wounds, your loneliness, your desire for escape, your endless overthinking.

Excuse me for addressing you directly here, fellow journey-reader, but this book was never meant to exist purely as confession. It's also a letter to every wandering soul I've met:

outside Madrid sex bars at sunrise,

inside Georgian wineries,

beneath hostel bunk beds,

inside Lisbon saunas,

and in shower stalls where strangers quietly cried after difficult phone calls home.

Every traveler I met carried wounds.

Some hid them elegantly.

Others spilled them openly over cigarettes and beer.

Most alternated between the two.

This book is my attempt to unpack mine honestly.

Not neatly. Not heroically. Honestly.

Across thirty-eight countries, seventy cities and hundreds of passing souls, I slowly realized this was never truly a travel memoir. It's a story about movement, yes — through cities, bodies, landscapes, languages and temporary homes — but mostly it's a story about trying to locate yourself while constantly elsewhere. Fuck it, I'll ruin the plot: this is a story about finding home. Call me fucking Homer and call this my Odyssey.

But seriously, maybe that's why the chapters are non-linear.

Healing rarely respects chronology.

Let's jump briefly.

Marrakesh, March 2025:

the concrete of my self-realization was still wet.

But Ghent, Belgium, April 2025 — that was different.

That was where something inside me finally unclenched.

I'm not sure it's wise to reveal this much in a prologue, but perhaps memoir itself is an act of ruining suspense in exchange for honesty.

After two weeks backpacking across Europe, I sat outside with a Belgian Delirium in my hand beneath warm sunlight while colorful strangers drifted around me speaking languages I'll never pretend that I understood.

And for the first time in nearly thirty years, I took a full breath without anxiety interrupting it halfway through.

The man who took that breath was not healed.

But he was changed.

He wrote the following³:

³ Refer to Appendix (Letter C) for the written text.

“Don’t say you’re ugly, don’t overdefine, don’t try to please, don’t criticize and constrain yourself for doing what you feel you need to do. This trip was all about self positioning, liberation and mostly a sense of acceptance devoid of anxiety and guilt. This trip was about being myself very gently, putting on a smile and not having to constantly hide, feel shame and put on a show. It’s crazy that this is the same guy who thought himself ugly, unlovable, unsociable and not fun. This trip taught me to stop over justifying myself and trying to label myself. It taught me to not compare, to not overthink and to do instead of think. I keep seeing how people live and they do it so well. Whereas I used to blame and chastise myself for everything I do – even though I did it anyway – I’ve now learned to fully self accept, self-appreciate, to believe in my choices and find that peace in them. My chest has no more room for anxiety and fear. It has no more time for guilt and blame and inacceptance based on what others think is right. I have no more energy to compare myself to the fit hunk in the nice jacket because I’m not him. When I was fully myself I made friends, I became attractive to others, I lost anxious blame. I can build on that. It’s in the ability to do, when the thinking is at rest. It’s in the ability to achieve when the self is loved.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. A million times over. I am so grateful...in Ghent.”

There is no resolution here. That so-called self-acceptance he wrote. Bullshit, he went on 50 other rollercoasters since. But, pacing, pacing – we’ll get there.

What does a backpacker really know?

This book will not offer clean redemption arcs or curated spiritual enlightenment. You may not even find traditional city guides. What you’ll find instead are fragments:

Malaysian Michelin-star restaurants,

water fights during Songkran on Khao San Road,

Nepali mountain trails,

Cambodian killing fields,

Bittersweet friendships,
missed flights,
cheap wine,
breakdowns,
hookups,
afterparties,
and the strange intimacy of strangers.

Most importantly, I hope you find your own curiosity somewhere in these pages.

Book the flight.

Take the road trip.

Invite the strangers.

Stay too long at the afters.

Keep moving. Find home. Find the kid.

Because if travel taught me anything, it's that all things — in boarding — shall pass.

Your hostel mate

19 April 2025

Kuwait City, Kuwait

Appendix

This Appendix contains images of the written notes taken across different cities in different states of mind, presented here to transport you, journey-reader to actual points in space and time on the road by way of hand-written words.

Letter (A)

I feel eroded and I feel like I'm losing my mind, losing control, losing any ability to feel joy. My body and mind don't feel like the body and mind I knew. I feel betrayed and they feel fixated on bad thoughts and topics, who the fuck is this sad on vacation? I really am trying to fight it, I'm aiming for better and I know I'll get it. But for now, this ebb and flow of the mood are truly starting to make me feel ill in the mind, spirit, body and tangible reality.

I know the causes, I've analyzed them to the marrow. I am really fighting and myself is obviously still there. It is just that this mind has become clouded. It's always there, the sadness, the disbelief in motive, the irrelevance of everything, the inability to love the self and recognize its worth. I know the solution too. I know it'll take habitual practice to get back to always joy and cheer. It feels like something in me broke but it's very fixable. It feels like there is a coating spread over me that's just sad and unhappy, it makes me feel like an empty shell, existing for the sake of existing. It makes me feel like everything I've done is unnecessary and purpose-less. I don't feel like I matter. I compare everything I do to yourself and it's pathetic. I know that this only leads to resentment. What can I do to remove these negative thoughts?

I've always wanted to be something. I've listed down the traits and characteristics that I'd like to be. I had a very clear idea of who I want to be and who I am. I was excessively confident. I was always able to find the light. I always overcame things. I did it for myself and for others. Now, I feel I do nothing. I know, rationally, that I'm doing excellently. However, the inside of my chest is shaking its head no. I feel like everything I do is wrong, is not loved, is overdone, is not accepted, is not ok and is fake. I don't feel worthwhile anymore. I don't feel like I believe in myself anymore and I feel

like a tainted, sick person. It's gotten bad and it has stretched on for far too long. I don't like how this feels at all. I don't like my outlook on life. I don't like myself.

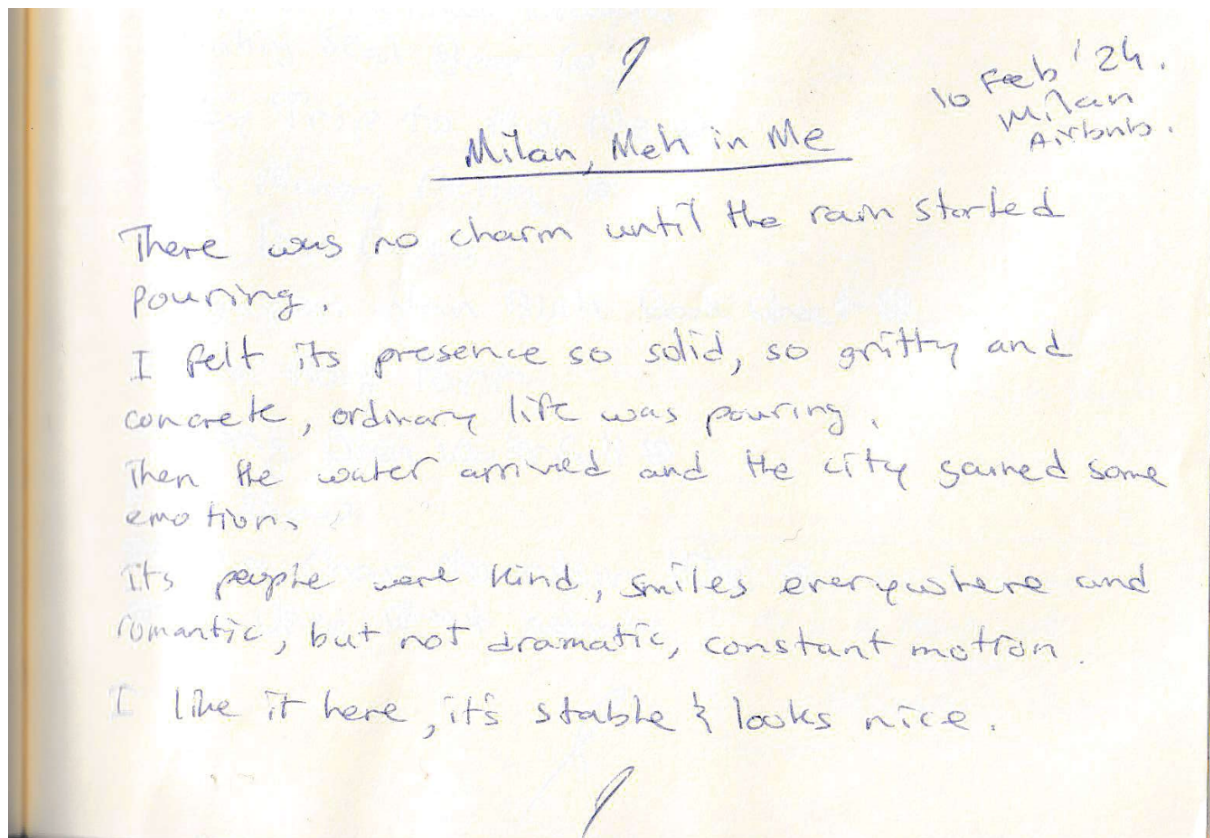
Even in writing this, I feel excessively dramatic. I feel like when I read it, my real self would congratulate me for having the courage to speak of this but also be like, 'come on. Get your shit together and do what needs to be done.'

Why have I always been the guy that overthinks his presence when we're supposed to be having a great time? Why have I psychanalyzed myself when I'm at a club? Why do I always worry if I'm embarrassing when I speak? Why can't I just enjoy the moment for what it is? Why can't I absorb experiences and enjoy myself? Why does everything have to feel tainted? Why can't I feel clean and normal and good? Why do I feel forced to act, guilty, unhappy, ~~be~~ trying to be like others?

Why do I take everything personally? Why do I compare and contrast myself to everything and everyone? With no balance, with no moderation. It's never, oh it's just a bad day. No, it becomes an existential crisis and everything is dark and there's no light at the end of it and it's a direct attack on my character.

Now let me rephrase that for healing's sake -

Letter (B)



Letter (C)

Confessions of a Guy in Ghent

Don't say you're ugly, don't overdefine, don't try to please. Don't criticize and constrain yourself for doing what you feel you need to do. This trip was all about self positioning, liberation and mostly a sense of acceptance devoid of anxiety and guilt. This trip was about being myself very gently, putting on a smile and not having to constantly hide, feel shame and put on a show. It's crazy that this is the same guy who thought himself ugly, unlovable, undesirable and not fun. This trip taught me to stop overjustifying myself and trying to label myself. It taught me to not compare, to not overthink and to do instead of think. I keep seeing how people live and they do it so well, whereas I used to blame and chastise myself for everything I do - even though I did it anyway - I've now learned to fully self accept, self appreciate, to believe in my choices and find that peace in them. My chest has no more room for anxiety and fear, it has no more time for guilt and blame and acceptance based on what others think is right. I have no more energy to compare myself to the fit hunk in the nice jacket because I'm not him. When I was fully myself I made friends, I became ~~more~~ attractive to others, I lost anxious blame. I can build on that. It's in the ability to do, when the thinking is at rest. It's in the ability to achieve when the self is loved.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. A million times over,
I am so grateful...

in Ghent,

April 6th 2025

