

## **Mold Removal**

Sitting in the stuffy recruitment office, sweat beading down the valley of my spine, I lazily read through the Australian Army application form, my pen hovering over each word as it rung out aloud in my head.

### **Have you spent more than three months overseas in the past six months?**

Pen tapping on the wooden desk, I prepared my answer. The rustle of the other applicant's pens on paper scratched through the air like a clingy cat pawing at a closed toilet door. Placing the pen on the line, I quickly scribbled: *London – 3 months*. Settling into the room once again, I went on to the next question.

### **What was the purpose of your time overseas?**

A knot in my stomach started winding itself up rather nicely as though that damned cat had placed its paw on the rewind button of a vacuum cleaner.

*Ugh, why the fuck do they need to know all this... national security I guess.*

Quickly, I scribbled the vaguest and most broadly applicable answer to such a question: *Working holiday*. Satisfied, I hurriedly went through the rest of the application ticking all the *No* boxes to your typical medical questions:

1. **Have you ever had any major surgery...** No
2. **Have you ever thought about suicide...** Yes, but No
3. **Do you have any pre-existing conditions that would impede your duties in the military...** A conscience, but No

After filling in the rest of the medical questionnaire, proved I could do a single push up, and talked to the recruiter who thought I'd be a great fit in Intelligence. Mostly because of my degrees in Behavioural Science and Information Technology and not at all because of me. All I wanted was to be an infantryman.

"No mate. *You* can't join *just* the infantry. You're too... You have this air of arrogance. The other soldiers wouldn't take kindly to it," said the recruiter as he tried his best to sear his stare into my memory. In hindsight, I suppose it worked. I can remember his dark brown eyes squinting down on me even though I was a foot taller than him. Plus, he was sitting down. I walked out of the recruitment centre with the box next to the 'Intelligence Officer' checked and was set to hear back from them for my first interview and psychological test within a couple of months.

Walking down the street, I thought about the other applicants in there. Sitting in the foyer, waiting to be called into the preliminary medical examination, I inspected what I considered to be my adversaries. All were baby-faced teenagers dressed in the same suits they had worn to their high school formal only a few months ago. As I sat there reading my book, I think it was a collection of essays by George Orwell, I overheard two of these freshly initiated adults talk about what they wanted to be.

“I jus’ wanna fuck stuff up ya know. I’ve bin studyin’ tha guns and artillery all night.”  
said one.

“Yea me too. Ya know they just got the new Steyr Aug rifle?” said another.

I remember snorting and smiling to myself, my head slightly shaking. I guess that recruiter really did have some sharp eyes. Though, contrary to everyone’s perception of me - the intellectual quietly scrutinising the world down aquiline nose, from behind horn-rimmed glasses, I am actually a firm believer in my own stupidity. Constantly I’m in a state of wonder about all my failures. And, more importantly, how I can make sure they never happen again.

These failures still haunt me. The question resounded through my head once more: *What was the purpose of your time overseas?* I had decided to travel fifteen thousand kilometres to the other side of the globe for the same reason many do. To reconstruct and redefine myself.

*Bye feelings of inadequacy.*

*Toodaloo anyone who knows anything about my past.*

*Au revoir ‘friends’.*

*Sayonara having to put on a mask every single time I left my room.*

Hello London. I’d worked all through University purely for the goal of escaping Australia. All the hours spent in a tech store dealing with the worst kinds of people retail has to offer. Ranging from perverted old men wondering why their Wi-Fi had turned off on their iPads to your typical bourgeois mum with her large sunglasses and coconut perfume yelling at you because you’re refusing to give her a refund. During my final goodbye to Australia I planned to leave my fears throughout the duty free area in Brisbane’s International Airport. Then, I’d shake off the rest of my anxieties during a brief stopover in Dubai. By the time I’d get to London, I’d be feeling like I’d just walked out of an exorcism, partly because being over six foot on an airplane for 20 hours is a trial in of itself, but mainly because I’d have been cleansed from my demons.

Landing in Heathrow I grabbed my bags and stepped onto the tube. Tapping my pockets. I made sure my jacket was fully zipped up so my wallet wouldn’t be stolen, and looped the strap of my bag around my foot. I read and re-read the instructions provided by the AirBNB owner as to how to get from Heathrow to West Kensington while glancing up now and then to make sure that no ruffians had started to move in on London’s newest settler.

Walking through Kensington, I felt like I'd found my place. The stately large flats preserved the original Victorian and Edwardian aesthetic that one often imagines when thinking of England. My room was at the top of an old flat which looked over an intersection. From that window I remember thinking how perfect this place was, and it was a pity that I'd have to find somewhere else to live. Optimistically, I opened my laptop and began to apply to places on [www.flatmates.co.uk](http://www.flatmates.co.uk), eager to find my own perfect little nook of London. The familiar spike of anxiety began to push itself into my head as I scrolled through the available places. Any that had even a similar living condition to where I currently slept was well outside my price range.

*I'll apply to a couple of places and come back to this later. They'll be more affordable when I get a job. I should focus on that,* I thought to myself, and decided to call it a night.

The next day I went into The Strand and picked up my bank cards and began to transfer my money. With each dollar converted to pound, I could feel the frayed threads that tied me to Australia strain like suspenders on an obese man. With what I felt was like a lot of money now safely secured in her Majesty's vaults, I squeezed my way back onto the tube filled with men and women who looked like they'd just been pulled out of a sardine can, waved through a cloud of pollution and then stuffed into a suit and then hung on the outbound line.

For the next two months I applied for jobs. I was confident I could get into human resources with my undergraduate psychology degree. My laptop's home screen was littered with different resumes, each containing slight nuances tailored for specific positions. I'd apply to every single job I saw and heard back from virtually, none. I looked to the calendar in the top right of my screen and counted the number of days left in my *AirBNB*. Seven remained before I was evicted and thrown out into the streets with the junkies and other undesirables of London. Opening up *flatmates*, I was confident that I'd have been inundated by people asking me to move in immediately. Every message I'd sent had been ignored. The word 'Read at ...' taunted me from the bottom of the message. I started to feel my room's walls close in around me and teeter above my head, threatening to collapse on me. Frantically, I started sending messages out to all places within my price range. Sometimes the world rewards you, and almost instantly I received a message back:

"Hi Zach wanna check out the room tomorrow around 2pm? Julian."

In a fury of typing, I replied: "Hey Julian! Yeah I'd love to. What's the address?"

"138 Concannon Road, Brixton" replied Julian.

Falling back into my queen bed, I pulled dozens of pillows to my chest and squeezed as hard as I could. I opened Facebook and looked for someone to share my news with. It must've been very early in the morning in Australia. It's not really until you have no one to tell your news to that you realise how alone you really are. I closed my eyes and let my victory over one of the world's basic human rights fail to fill the cavernous hole inside me like a single morsel of plankton inside a whale's stomach.

Rolling out of bed at 12pm, I fixed myself a peanut butter sandwich and began my daily ritual of scrolling through job listings. It seemed like I'd already applied to every job in London. Picking up my jacket I double-checked what line I had to take to Brixton. Since before I left everyone always told me "*don't go south of the river*" but when you're about to be homeless, location quickly falls down on your list of priorities.

Stepping off the train, wafting fumes of marijuana assaulted my senses. Melding into the shambling masses of people pushing their way up the crowded escalators to the street, Brixton's architecture came into view. A tall apartment building stood opposite the exit of the train station. Its windows had been smashed to bits, allowing you to see through to the guts of the building. For a second, I was slightly confused, as I could see heads bobbing down the street behind it. It took me a moment to realise that the inner walls of the building had also been completely destroyed. From the outside, the only thing that called that place home was broken glass and stained mattresses that often enjoyed the company of graffiti artists.

The surrounding neighbourhood, or at least the route to Concannon Road, didn't withhold any redeeming factors about what lay south of the River Thames. The street lamps were always on this time of year, dully glinting behind a thin veil of mist, or smog. It's kind of hard to tell. Though when you sneeze and only find black bits of snot on your tissue, it leans you slightly toward the latter.

138 Concannon Road was a small brick building with a blackened tile roof. The bricks had been poorly painted white to hide the effects of both weather and neglect. As I got to the door, I could hear the faint pulse of electronic music. I began to knock. After waiting a minute, listening intently for any kind of movement, I knocked on the door once again; this time my fist progressively began to pound the door harder. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught the blinds from the windows that looked onto the street flutter, and heard the familiar moans of someone who had bashed their hip against the corner of a table. As the door unlocked, I put my best smile on.

"Hello?" groaned the pale man behind the door in a slightly Scandinavian accent.

"Hi, um, I'm Zach I was told to come here and check out a room that was available to rent? Julian sent me."

"Oh, right. I just woke up. I'm Julian." said Julian as he opened the door and rubbed the tip of his hip. "The room's upstairs."

As we went upstairs I passed Julian's room. It was as though he'd managed to capture an entire cloud in his room; it was clearly manmade, as the scent of marijuana floated out on smoky tendrils. Happily, I imagined Julian's room as the source of Brixton's patented scent.

"This is the bathroom. You can check it out if you want." said Julian.

I stuck my head in and had to edge in sideways. There was a simple shower that had green scum between the tiles. I slid the sliding door shut and turned on the spot.

*I'm not going to be able to sit on the toilet with the door closed.*

Still turning on the spot, I decided to take a seat on the toilet a little too quickly. My knees hit the door with a loud bang and a mirror that was attached to a string fell off its perch and hit the back of the head. Luckily it didn't shatter.

"You all good in there?" asked Julian.

"Er, yeah, just figuring out spatial logistics," I replied with a nervous laugh, sliding the door back open, scurrying down to the door where Julian waited.

"This is it. Just let yourself out when you're done."

I wandered into the room and was confronted by a large patch of mold above the bed. With a sigh, I walked in. It wasn't actually that bad of a room; it was just *dirty*. Though, with effort you could transform it into something that would pass as liveable. A desk in the right corner, a large queen-sized bed under the windows (once the mold had been cleaned off). I'd wipe down the mirrors on the built-in wardrobes and hang some kind of art on the wall. Maybe some hanging plants. This could be home.

I bounced down stairs and knocked on Julian's door.

"Can I move in by the end of the week?"

"Shit. Sure, just bring the bond when you come. It's £700. Then £350 for the fortnight. Cash."

"Alright sounds good."

That Friday I had my first job interview. I decided I'd wear all my best clothes so they wouldn't get crushed in the suitcase as I moved into my new room. I even had a grocery bag full of mold removal spray as well as gloves, sponges, and Jif cleanser for those particularly stubborn stains. Tenderly, I tapped my inside breast pocket and felt the wad of cash stuffed into an old envelope the *AirBNB* hostess found for me. I put my headphones in and tapped on *Fishies* by The Cat Empire; a song that, to this day, never fails to makes my soul jive.

With a backpack over each shoulder and a large suitcase in my hand, I made my way off the tube and back up onto the streets of Brixton. I could feel the leather on my newly bought oxford shoes tightly clinch around the toes of my feet.

*Dad was right. I should've broken these in before I left.*

As I walked past the local convenience store, I passed three burly dark men who I thought called out to me whilst lounging on the stoop of their apartment. I figured they must've been talking to someone else as the wailing trumpets of The Cat Empire drowned out my surroundings. As I wandered down the street, I looked back and saw the three men sauntering behind me, their hands tucked deeply into their hoodies front pockets.

*You're an idiot. Nothing to worry about.*

I crossed the street and counted the number of turns left between where I was and Concannon Road. Only one more right turn and two left before I could officially drop my bags and call London home. Glancing behind me once again and saw that the men had followed me across.

*Just a coincidence, surely.*

To be safe I started to pick up the pace a little, wincing as my toes started to squeeze together. Taking another furtive look behind me I caught one of the men breaking into a run.

Following suit I sprinted toward my new house, hoping that they'd leave me alone once I reached *home*.

However, running from three street urchins whilst carrying two backpacks, a suitcase, dressed in a suit with ill-fitting oxford shoes, will always put you at a slight disadvantage. I found this out when my suitcase hit the back of my knee and sent me crashing to the ground with panache, books flying out of both of my backpacks. When I looked up the three men stood over me, each with a knife pointing down at me. The Cat Empire howling from my earphones, which now lay on the sidewalk.

“Whatcha got for us monkeyman?” said the tall one.

I could feel my heart sink and my brain frantically search for a conclusion in the debate between fight or flight, like world leaders trying to figure out what to do about North Korea. My hands trembled as I reached into my breast pocket and slowly slid out the envelope. I held the envelope out to them and the wide one snatched it up.

“Oh shit, bruv. Man's got like £1000 pounds in here. You lucky we ain't greedy fam otherwise we'd take ya clothes as well monkeyman. Give us ya phone. Ya done now,” said the wide one.

I could hear them laughing as they ran down the long street. Slowly, I pushed myself off the pavement and slid my books back into my bag. I winced as I heard the sound of something smash into the street. In hindsight, it was probably my phone being thrown into the ground, though I had no desire to find out. I limped toward Concannon Road, my suitcase making that awful grating noise of plastic on concrete.

I banged on the door. This time with a clear feeling of impudence until I saw Julian brush aside his window curtains.

“Oh shit man what happened to you?” said Julian looking me up and down as he opened the door.

“I got mugged on my way here. They took the bond money. Is it okay if I crash for the evening you can take this watch for collateral or something?” I said.

Sizing my watch up, Julian snatched it and pulled the door open.

“Thanks. I'll get you your money tomorrow. What's the WiFi password?”

“fuckthepolice420, all lowercase.”

Dragging my belongings upstairs and into my room I dropped onto the old stained mattress. Looking up to the mold on the ceiling I noticed it had somehow gotten bigger in the time since I last saw it. Maybe it was just me though. With a sigh, I pulled out my laptop and ordered a one-way ticket back to Australia for the next day. Looking up at that mold, I felt it creep inside of me and line my already empty vessel, making its walls brittle and thin.

Walking back through Brisbane's familiar airport, I began to feel pieces of me crumble and fall away as my displaced anxieties rushed back in. I knew then that my first and deepest break had occurred under that spot of mold in London. Since then I have left a trail of blight across the continent, retracing my search for self. Maybe someday I'll return to clean up, put the pieces back together; but not for a long time.