

A good night's sleep

We're much later than we'd planned, but that quirky little pub was very cosy and the ales on offer went down way too easily. I'm feeling decidedly tipsy; I blame the folk group, getting us all singing along like that and losing track of how many pints we were supping. I can't help myself and do a little skip and a twirl as we go down the hotel corridor, I'm just so happy with life at the moment.

"Gannin' along the Scotswood Roooaad," I sing with vigour and style... OK, under the influence, "to see the Blaydon Races – "

"Sshhh!" Dearly Beloved hisses at me, frowning. "No more singing. People are trying to sleep," he whispers. Then he grins, that lovely cheeky grin of his that forms a web of laughter lines around his oh so gorgeous brown eyes. He holds the key card against our room lock and says, "Glad you enjoyed the evening," and guides me in with an arm round my back, "but it's time to settle down."

Time for sleep indeed. We walk into room 105 and dump our bags down on the floor. I grab the washbag and pause on the way to the bathroom.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

"What *is* that noise?" Tipsy I may be but I don't normally start hearing things.

Dearly Beloved cocks his head to one side, listening. "Central heating/air con," he says. "And a bearing's worn, so it's not running true." He frowns and I think the engineer in him is, as ever, concerned about the machinery, but his attention is on the room; he says, "You sure this is OK for you?"

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I nod. "Sure." I'm quietly pleased he's showing some evidence of thinking of me and my comfort, having dragged me down here for moral support. The room is spacious and clean, but then I notice the source of that frown: those beds. Having agreed we disrupt each other's sleep too much to share a bed we always have separate beds now, so one of us will have to put up with that narrow single bed, pushed up against the outside wall like an afterthought, or a poor attempt to maximise flexibility and profits. The winner of the unspoken competition tonight will luxuriate in the expanse of the double bed. As for the loser...

"I *did* book a twin room for us," he says, "honest. I didn't expect a double and a little single like that one."

Is he worried I'll think he's cocked up one of the few times *he's* made travel arrangements for us? "We'll manage," I reassure him. The amount of beer I drank would ensure sleep in a drafty barn, let alone this (perhaps overly) warm room. It's a big day for him, tomorrow. He's already nervous on his own account; don't want him fretting about me - *ha! that's a laugh* - or the booking too...

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

...but I hope that noise stops soon.

"You positive you'll be OK on that single?"

That's my Dearly Beloved all right, ever the gentleman... Not! Implicit competition to explicit claim in one easy move, but tonight is not the time to challenge him. I try not to look at the inviting expanse of double bed, with its pristine white bed linen, as I walk over to the single. I sit and give a little bounce; the quilt is just as thick

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and inviting as his, but I can hear springs twanging under me. "It'll be fine." I smile at him and hand over the washbag. "You go and clear the bathroom first. You need a good night's sleep."

Off he toddles to brush his teeth, no doubt glad I'm not pursuing an issue he doesn't want me to dispute. Certainly he won't ask outright if I would prefer the double. As they say in political and legal circles, never ask a question to which you don't already know the answer. The bathroom door closes and instead of silence I hear it clearly.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Or is it just because of the bathroom extraction? I mentally reassure myself there is no way people would use this hotel if that noise continued all night. Or is it just this particular room it's so loud in? Are we above the boiler and fans or something? It would be typical for us to have made a booking two months in advance, for a quiet weekend in March, and still be allocated the worst room in the hotel, the room that ought to be a last resort when the hotel is bursting at the seams.

I gingerly raise a corner of the bottom sheet to inspect the mattress. The rough brown weave clearly shows evidence of where the springs are, the ancient fabric dipping between them. I notice a six foot bolster leaning against the wall, which suggests this bed is normally used as a sofa. But I wouldn't want to sit on it for any length of time any more than I'm savouring the prospect of sleeping on it. Ah well, I've slept on far worse during my travels abroad. 11:30pm is not a good time to be disturbing Dearly Beloved, mentally or physically, not with his op early in the morning;

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let him get his rest, let him sleep. I'll be fine... or fine enough to cope until morning... probably.

We both settle down. Well, he settles and is soon snoring, despite the loud creaking and twanging noises from my bed as I lie down and try to accommodate my body to the Himalayan contours beneath me.

Sheesh! This is so uncomfortable! I try my left side, my normal 'go to sleep' position. The minutes pass slowly as sleep evades me and the metal under my hip starts to feel harder and harder. I gingerly turn over, seeking a position where my right hip can take its turn compressing the unforgiving metal. More minutes drag past as I listen to his snores...

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

... and the air con.

It's very dark. Just as Dearly Beloved likes it when he sleeps. And his mattress is obviously to his liking, judging by the contented snuffling and snorting and deep, throaty breathing. Lucky bastard. I wonder what time it is? Can't see my watch. No clock.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

I turn onto my back and stare at an invisible ceiling.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Ah, there's hope for a little more comfort this way: my greater weight distribution

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is using more of the springs so less load per square inch. Doesn't feel too good under my shoulder blades though; less fat and muscle padding than my butt I suppose.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Just ignore it; it won't sound as bad if I stop concentrating on it. Clear my mind of all thoughts and sleep will come. *Haha! You stupid bitch; as if anyone can do that. It's like 'don't think of a pink elephant.'* Shut up, I don't need your input right now, thanks all the same. *When I see an elephant flyyyyyee...* Enough already! Disney? I haven't seen those films since my little boy actually was little, and I don't want a reprise! *That was lots of years ago – he's heading towards middle age now. Anyway, those folk songs are even older and you enjoyed them.* No! No Disney songs, not tonight.

I start to feel as depressed as the gaps between the springs.

Come on, woman! My mind and will are strong! I can do this; relax the body and the mind will follow into sleep. I'll get my revenge on him by making him put up with the snores I always manage in loud profusion when I sleep on my back – *Or so he claims; I've never heard me snore.* – OK, if I believe him, we'll have a contest of it tonight, snore for snore, and see who wins.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

It's not working.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

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Time passes so slowly at night. *Only when you're lying there awake; now, take a work day and the night's over before it starts.* Don't I know it!

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

And it's so dark, with those thick curtains blocking the streetlights. How long have I been lying here now? Fifteen minutes? Half an hour? Two hours? Hard to tell.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

And now my bladder is telling me I have to get up again anyway. I sit up and mentally plan out my route to the loo in this unfamiliar room. I take a few tentative steps into the room –

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

– and breathe a sigh of relief, of hope, as the air con noise goes a bit quieter. Is it winding down for the night?

There's just the faintest whiteness gleaming from the quilts to guide me round the beds. I successfully negotiate my way there and back, then lay down again for another attempt at sleep. That's it, wriggle the hip just a bit further to the right... that should do it. Now, relax!

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Hang on, it's louder again. I move my head slightly and realise the noise is resonating up through the wall the bed has been pushed against, the amplified noise being transmitted from imperfect bearing directly to my skull. I get out of bed again

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and, as quietly as possible, try moving the bed away from the wall. When I lay down again I realise it was a futile effort; I'd have to move the bed to the centre of the room to make a difference. Roughly where *his* bed is.

I get up – again – and push the bed back, since I don't want Dearly Beloved getting up this side of his bed in the night and crashing into me or banging his shins and yelling loud enough to wake me. Assuming I ever get to sleep. I'm tired enough I'd happily leave it in his way if the move had had any effect, but not for no reason.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Don't focus on it! Drift into sleep on a wave of pleasant thoughts.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Concentrate! I *know* I can do it. I've done it before in worse situations when I was younger. When I was younger... Ah, yes, happy days. Well, I'm not an old crone yet so I can do it again! *Hey, do you remember that hostel in Vancouver? British YHA standard it most definitely was not!* OK, so it was a doss house, but the sheets and showers were clean and it was right in the middle of a very interesting part of town. *You didn't risk cooking there, though, did you!* That one in Alert Bay was superb... and humming birds in the garden and that orca in the bay... *And the nearest bar miles away.*

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Snort! Snuffle... mumble...

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A contented sigh from Dearly Beloved as he rolls over.

Bastard.

No, no, no! Don't get all tense. Dream thoughts, mind diversions...

In a gadda da vida, honey,

Don't you know that I'm loving you,

Iron Butterfly?!! Where the hell did you drag that one up from? And this is certainly no Garden of Eden, not in anyone's wildest imaginations.

In a gadda da vida, baby,

Don't you know that I'll always be true?

Shut the fuck up!

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

You too!

A small river... Yes, that will do the job. And woodland birds – *Which birds live in the woods?* – It doesn't matter! I don't know the difference between one bird's song and another anyway! – *OK, but it would be nice to get the details right. Details are important.* – Just get on with it! Sunbeams coming down through the branches, dappled green light, the fragrance of bluebells – *Is it warm and dry enough to lie down in woods when the bluebells are out?* – Stop it! Warmth, floral perfumes, birdsong. Feel each muscle relaxing, one by one, from my feet all the way up my legs, my hips – *Perhaps it's best not to think about your hips and those springs...* – **eyelids drooping!** Sweet carolling of robins and blackbirds and tits...

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

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No! Ignore it, tune it out.

A cuckoo calls. Sweet trilling melodies all around...

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

I shoot upright. What the hell is a dump truck doing right outside a first floor window? Because that's what it sounds like...

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

... and how long will *this* noise continue tonight?

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

All those relaxed muscles are now tense again. I punch the pillows, turn on my side away from the wall and use one pillow to cover my other ear. It doesn't help.

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

More minutes drag their seconds past, one-by-slow-one. I feel the spring jabbing into my hip again but haven't the energy to move. *You're going to have some display quality bruises in the morning.*

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

Gosh, it's so warm in here. I'm sweating buckets. I throw the quilt off, knowing that in itself will give me problems sleeping as I need the weight of bedding on me to form my secure sleeping cocoon.

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CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

I look across but I can't see it: the thermostat is on that wall, the other side of his bed. *It's digital so you'd have to turn the light on to see the buttons.* Yes, I know. *And the light would wake him.* I know!

CHUG

I lift my head. After an eternity the dump truck has been turned off. For the night?

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

Okaaay... Not good, but better than the dump truck. All things are relative. The air con is almost starting to sound soothing after that horror. Now then, back to the stream, the wood, the sunlight, the birds... So tired. Eyelids really are drooping. I'm only wincing a little bit from slight changes in position. One can become accustomed to almost anything from necessity. Nearly asleep... *YAWN* Let's make a holiday of it, he said, that couple of days between the op and the first check-up.

Oh, it's a jolly 'oliday with Maarryyy,

Mary makes your heart so light,

Sheesh! Betrayed by my own mind! No! No! No! Birdsong!!! Trickling fucking water!

I punch the pillows again and throw myself onto my back. I start at my feet again, relax each muscle, listening to the rivulets over the rocks, watching the sun glinting diamonds from a small waterfall...

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Bad move; now I need the loo again. *sigh*

More deep, contented, back of the throat breathing from Dearly Beloved as I creep back to bed. No, don't get annoyed with him, it's not his fault. Don't think of air con. And definitely don't think of water! Sunshine: warm, relaxing sunshine. And bird song. *Creak... twang...* OWWW! Move a bit further left... That's better. Sunshine...

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

For fuck sake!!!! Now I know why the Spanish have exclamation marks at the beginning as well as the end of sentences. I need way more exclamation marks!

What time is it?

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

Can I get up soon?

CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A-CHUG-A

An eternity later it stops. But it's not quiet.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

And now it's the Chinese water torture, lying here waiting for the next CHUG.

And, in the meantime, the ever-faithful

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

In a gadda da vida, honey,

¡Aaieeee! And that's not remotely enough exclamation marks!!!! You are a

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traitor, Brain! You think I haven't enough to cope with tonight?

In a gadda da vida, baby,

Evidently not.

Twang!

Toss and turn. Can't get comfortable. Can't relax. Can't sleep. So tired...

Nothing else for it, I'll have to share that double bed with Dearly Beloved. It's king size, it'll be OK if I stay over to one side, we won't disturb each other too much...

Aaaaah! A comfortable, supportive mattress under me. No springs poking into me. Air con not amplified by the wall; still there but not as bad. Eyelids droop. I'll at least get a few hours' sleep before getting Dearly Beloved into town for his op.

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

...

Blackness. Total blackness. Terror.

I'm pinned down, tightly restrained, tied to a bed. I can't move my limbs. I can feel a presence, a menacing, lurking presence. I can't do a thing to escape. I hear low growling, snuffling noises; they're getting closer, louder!

My eyelids fly open, a scream half formed, my heart is pounding and my breathing rapid...

... only to find Dearly Beloved's wedged himself against me, his arm and leg draped over me. He's now snoring directly into my ear.

The sweat of my panic slowly dries as my heart rate returns to normal. I try to ease him away from me but he's too heavy. It feels way too close to revenge when I

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jab my elbow into his ribs to get him to turn over. But satisfying!

Hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah-hmmm-ah...

In a gadda da vida, baby,

Oh, just piss off, won't you?

Big day tomorrow... *Today...*

I yawn so hard my eyes water.

Look for the – mmpf – baaare necessities,

The simple bare necessities,

Forget about your worries and your strife,

No! Need sleep, Baloo.

Yeah, man!

Or at least a few hours... Have to get up at 6:30 – *yawn* – to get there in time. Need to –

C'mon, Baggy, get with the beat!

I'm warning you!

Oh, OK.

I wriggle deeper into the mattress. Mmm, this is sooo comfortable... Need to change rooms tomorrow...

Today...

sigh You always have... to have... the last...