

Chapter 2: Earth's Inconveniences

No one likes to travel. I don't mean visiting other places and enjoying what pleasantries could be found there. That's not too bad. I mean the actual act of moving from one place to another. Whether it's by cramming into a car and rolling at impossible speeds across the ground or getting stuffed into a metal tube, set to hurtle across the globe from kilometers in the air, traveling is the worst.

In my opinion, flying is marginally better than other modes of transport, and that's only because it's so much faster. A few hours of my time are worth the indignities I might suffer in the airport or the plane itself. Some things do, however, always prove exceptionally irritating.

It never failed. Be prepared for a flight by arriving hours before it departed and the line through security was near non-existent, leaving you bored at the gate long before you needed to be there. Run late and the line spilled onto the street, leaving you chewing your fingernails while you waited, in the hopes that the bad habit would somehow keep you from missing your flight. When that worst of possibilities nonetheless happened and you *somehow* managed to wrangle a seat on the next possible flight, you always ended up beside the mother with a squalling baby or the man with no concept of personal space.

Usually, I chose the prepared method when traveling by air. Today, I had not. As I walked out the doors of San Jose's airport, I shook off my disgruntled attitude to appreciate my surroundings, breathing in the ever-present, wonderfully crisp air before I shivered. I'd forgotten how much colder this place was when compared to home, but I didn't care. I was here! The city of dreams.

Or of my dreams at least.

As my rideshare took me to my hotel, I watched parched grass and homes from the '70's roll past, one after another. Maybe not the most aesthetically pleasing area but it was leaps and bounds better than Houston's concrete sprawl, and while the cost of living here never ceased to blow my mind, I thought dealing with it would be worth it if only for three things.

One: the weather. San Jose might be colder, but that was colder when compared to my current natural habitat, where the sun literally tried to kill me every day. While it was constantly sunny here, that distant ball of fire was more of an ally than an enemy, giving this city perfect weather almost *all the time*. Every time I'd been here, it had never rained. I'd never seen cloudy skies. Perfect blue had always greeted me, and while I might miss rainy days if I lived here, I thought I could handle their loss.

Two: the people. In Houston, if one presented as anything other than the typical WASP, one got strange looks. Deviate too far from that pattern, and walking down the city's streets could become dangerous.

In San Jose, people were more relaxed. Alternate dress and lifestyles weren't as prevalent as you might think, but when they showed up, vividly dyed hair, tattoos, and piercings never received so much as a second glance.

And the *nerd culture!* I had yet to make a visit here without seeing a Firefly reference on a t-shirt or something equally nerdgasm inducing.

Schedules were much more relaxed here too. Gone was the 'go-go-go' corporate mentality of Houston and the do-it-exactly-as-your-told approach. Here, people only cared if your work was done on time, which would come as a welcome relief for me.

Three: opportunity. San Jose served as the hub for Silicon Valley. Mountain View, Cupertino, and other such suburbs lay around the city, and since I was a software engineer, my mind cried out to dive into these work environments and never emerge. If I managed to attract the attention of a tech giant, I'd pack up my belongings and leave Houston without so much as a farewell. I'd do it in a heartbeat.

After thanking my ride share's driver, I rolled my suitcase onto the sidewalk, taking a moment to prepare. My least favorite part of trips like this, pretending to be friends with people I didn't like, was next.

"Brennan!" someone shouted as I walked into the hotel's lobby.

Finding my co-workers wasn't hard. They were clustered by the elevators, the only people here in button-up shirts and suit pants.

Starting Monday, such a sight wouldn't be out of place since that was when the convention started, but for now, their attire stuck out like a sore thumb.

"Hey, guys!" I called with a wave. "Let me get checked in and stash my stuff."

Doing so didn't take long, although once I was in my room, I made sure to look myself over. Heaven forbid if I appeared as anything besides the perfectly put together business woman.

Once I was ready, I took the elevator down, checking whether my parents had gotten my text about my arrival. I'd received nothing from dad yet, but my mom had responded with an adorable picture of Beau lounging on their couch.

"Enjoy it while you can, little bastard," I said, ignoring the ache already invading my heart.

While I'd gotten settled, my co-worker had moved. One, Allan, was barely visible through the door into the hotel's on-site restaurant.

“Am I the last one here?” I asked as I approached.

“You got here right after Spence. Don’t worry,” Allan said. “We didn’t wait long.”

“Well, that’s good,” I said. “How was your flight?”

“Ehhh,” Allan said, rocking his flattened hand back and forth. “Could have gone worse. If you want a story, you should ask Zubair. He had trouble getting through security again.”

Making a sympathetic noise, I clicked my tongue.

“He should get pre-check, poor thing.”

“I don’t think that would solve the problem.”

Before I could answer, Spence ambled up to us with drinks in his hands.

“You like whiskey sours, right, Bren?” he asked, extending one my way.

“Yes,” I drawled. “We’re drinking already?”

“The boss is,” Spence said, jiggling his offered glass.

“In that case.”

Snatching the drink from him, I half-emptied it in one go.

“Bad flight?” Allan asked, taking his own drink.

“You have no idea,” I said with a groan, “but I’m here now, as are we all. Do we have a table yet or...?”

“We do, actually,” Spence said. “Why do you think I came to get you two?”

“Lead on, then.”

As Allan strode after Spence, I hung back a moment, taking another sip. One exchange and I was almost drained. Thank God Tim hadn’t gone on another of his ‘alcohol is of the devil’ spells. I probably wouldn’t make it through the night without this liquid assistance.

As we joined the others, I half-listened to everyone’s greetings, equally as inattentive as we looked over the menu and placed our orders. When the waitress eventually left us alone, though, nothing stood between us software engineers and the question that had been jangling in at least my head since learning about this trip. Fortunately, I didn’t have to voice it.

“So, Tim, you plan on telling us why we’re here three days before the convention starts?” Spence asked. “I won’t complain about getting to spend a weekend in beautiful California but...”

But why this change in routine? I didn't think the company would fly us halfway across the country for training if our jobs were about to become... not ours, but unexpected circumstances like this had never boded well for us in the past. Why ask for us to fly out on Friday morning rather than Sunday night? It was...really quite strange that they'd done that, ever leaving the choice of travel plans up to us.

"As you all know, we didn't perform as expected last year," Tim said.

Oh, no. I'd been right. He was about to fire us.

"But this year went exceptionally well," he said, which stifled my nervous laughter.

Paranoid. I'd been entertaining my paranoid thinking *yet again*. I really needed to get that under control.

"And a lot of that success has come about because of the team sitting around me," Time continued. "Management wanted to spread the love a little, so to speak. I persuaded them to let us take some time exploring the area on the company's dime. So. How'd you four like to spend a couple of days in wine country?"

"Are you driving?" Zubair immediately asked.

Chuckles rose around me, overriding any excitement or worry from those at the table. Everyone here knew how much Zubair hated cars.

"Stop it, Zub," Allan hissed. "If Tim's forced behind the wheel, he might take the offer back."

"I'll drive," Tim loudly said, rolling his eyes. "I've picked a lovely resort for us to stay at. All drinks, massages, food, you name it is paid for by the company, and we get to try some of the best wines in the country straight from the source. What do you think?"

"That sounds *amazing*," I said.

I'd come here expecting a weekend of small talk and awkward social interactions, followed by five days in a crowd, but with this, I might find some alone time. Time where I could read and write.

"The lady gives her approval," Allan said. "That means the rest of us can go, right?"

"Oh, hush," I said, lightly shoving him. "I haven't kept the rest of you from that many events."

Around the table, the men flicked their eyes to one another, quirked their lips, or let their hands twitch.

"Of course not, Bren."

Our food arrived in the nick of time. For them. While digging into dinner, I forced myself not to glare as my co-workers devolved into chatter about some sporting event, football in nature most likely.

I knew what the rest of this meal would entail. My co-workers would get wrapped up in their subjects of interest, and with them being nothing like mine, I'd fade into the background. They'd make no effort at including me, and I'd let them do that. I shouldn't blame them for it, considering I'd do the same in their place.

But I did. Watching them, a word came to me unbidden: a whisper in my mind.

Bastards.

Revision #1

Created 27 July 2025 18:34:51 by FatalisticFable

Updated 14 August 2025 13:52:25 by FatalisticFable