

A Matter of Perception

There's a sliver of light attacking my retinas like a laser beam when I wake up in the motel in Frankfort, Kentucky. The beige curtains don't quite fit the large picture window that opens up on to the asphalt parking lot and the sun is creeping through the gaps in attack mode, determined to usher in the day. "It's going to be a beautiful day in Frankfort, reaching highs of 87 degrees," blares the disembodied, overenthusiastic radio voice on 97.5 "double-you ay em zee", transmitting from Louisville.

This is my only day to explore the diminutive capital of the state of Kentucky, but I'm finding it hard to move from the bed. It's been a rough night, as the sheets tangled about my body in knots a sailor would be proud of can testify. As I free myself from my nocturnal bondage, the insufferable itching starts.

I'm on day 63 of what was supposed to be a month-long meandering trip through the great open plains of Midwestern America. The company I work for in London is attempting to sponsor my visa but it's taking longer than expected. There's an application deadline at the end of each month and they've just missed the second one, leading me to hastily scrawl a new route in my notebook. Hello Frankfort.

I alighted from the Greyhound at 7.40pm yesterday, the bus bang on schedule. Farewelling the latest group of oddballs thrust together in travelling communion, I hoisted my rucksack onto my back with something akin to a golf swing for the one-mile walk to the Days Inn. A toot of a bus horn and a wink and a wave from the exceedingly friendly driver, Dave, signalled my return to the road.

Deviating from my customary travel routine, I'd lined up some company in Frankfort through a dating website. Chris was lovely. He'd rolled down the window of his big black truck and shot me a grin that displayed the origin of the deep laugh lines etched around his full lips. His bald head was uniformly tanned to match his face, the mesmerising vortex of his electric-blue eyes making me blush.

We'd had a great night, eating and drinking our way through the town, winding up at the last bar standing, where lawyers mixed with drunks and rednecks with wine buffs. Gallant to the end, Chris had driven me home, leaping out of the truck to open my door, allowing me to clumsily slide to the sidewalk. I'd been mildly disappointed that he hadn't leant in for a kiss, but it was probably better this way.

The late night, the laughter and the beer don't explain why my eyes are now swollen shut.

I lean in close to the mirror and use my fingers to widen the slit between my eyelashes. Reflected back is a trail of angry red bites leading across my eyelids, down my cheeks and onto the side of my neck. Dropping my damp t-shirt onto the bathroom floor, I find a sprinkling of the wrathful lumps zigzagging across my shoulders and down my arms. They bypass my torso and continue at the top of my legs. The three on the rim of my left ear are particularly irritating. I look dreadful and I want to scratch my skin away, layer by layer, until there is nothing left.

When I'd crawled into bed in the early hours of the morning I'd noticed a few mosquito bites. Dousing them with a bite pen, the acrid smell of ammonia burnt the hairs in my nostrils, but it had done little to relieve the itching. I couldn't see or hear the dive bombers, but more and more bites had appeared. I'd pulled the sheet up to my ears and dampened a facecloth to chill the worst patches, leaving clammy wet blotches on the mattress. The vampiric insects had clearly won the battle.

The family in the breakfast room breaks off their chattering when I enter. The mother leans forward conspiratorially. "I have Benadryl," she volunteers, handing over two small pink tablets. I'm desperate, mired in an internal world of misery and I place the pills on the end of my tongue and wash them down with spittle gathered from my tear ducts, which are threatening to overflow. My brain instantly turns to mush.

In a doped up haze I march the 3 miles into Frankfort proper. Even sheltered by rock-star sunglasses I'm dazzled by the sunlight sparkling and glistening, as it enfolds me in warmth. Every atom is magnified and the air feels thick and juicy. I can taste it. I gaze at the train tracks, unable to comprehend the lines stretching into infinity. My eyes are dry and as I make a conscious effort to blink, the word 'bedbugs' drops into my head. Of course.

I take a seat at the local café and log in to their Wi-Fi. According to Pest World, bedbugs bite in threes and they have a passion for the face and neck, unlike mosquitoes. The bite pattern is known as breakfast, lunch and dinner. I touch the raging spots on my face, tracing the brail outline. One, two three. Down my ears, one, two three. Over my shoulders, one two three. I have been the victuals in a bedbug feast.

The miasma returns as I stand and I wander through the brain-fog. A pick-up truck pulls up next to me and a young man with not enough teeth and a cowboy hat offers me a lift. I climb into his car without thinking. I don't know where I want to go. I barely know who I am. He takes me to the Capital building and as I pull on the door handle he drawls, "You know, you're real pretty." I'm tempted to remove my glasses in a Twilight Zone moment and growl "Do you want to see something really scary?", but instead I give a weak smile and stagger back to the motel, crumpling the scrap of paper with his number on it in my sweaty palm until it has turned into paper mache.

My pack feels lighter today, but I think it's because I am heavier. I sit at the bus stop, fading in and out. A rotund woman with chipmunk cheeks and a mound of shopping bags shares my bench. Removing my glasses to rub my eyes, she tells me she thinks she was bitten by a spider. This is Midwestern empathy. She points to a lump on her foot and I share my hydrocortisone cream with her.

When the bus pulls up, two young men tumble down the stairs and quickly light up cigarettes, sucking hard on the filters and blowing plumes of smoke from their noses. Dave the driver leaps off and flings

open the luggage compartment, grabbing my pack. He welcomes me back on board and asks how I'm doing. "Not so well", I say, pushing my sunglasses up to rest on the top of my head in explanation. Dave lets out a low whistle and the smokers stop mid-puff, staring at me in fascinated horror.

I have just become the strangest person on the bus.



My lumpy bed-bug face