

It's Funny What I Find Funny

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"It's Funny What I Find Funny"

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Contents

It's Funny What I Find Funny	1
You're English?.....	6
Steve's Squirrels	10
Just a Thought.....	20

It's Funny What I Find Funny

I have not experienced many of the life shattering events that many other writers have been through. There have been no alcoholics in my family, no near death experiences and my parents are still happily married. I had a normal, middle-class childhood where my parents worked hard to ensure that my brother and I could both get a good start in life. I am about as normal as they come, without, I hope getting into the boring category. I even look pretty normal; brown hair, brown eyes, medium height and weight. I don't tend to stick out. The only thing that people thought strange about me was my hatred of the little red dots on plugs, but that is hardly anything to shout about, especially as this hatred has been in recession for the past four years.

Some people may know this already, and I apologise, but others may not and it is important to understand what I am writing about: English sockets are different to American ones. English ones have three prongs that are spaced in a triangle. The actual casing is shaped almost like a square with rounded corners. They are about the size of the top of a coke can - but square. In my biased opinion, English plugs are much more

elegant on a wall than American ones. Instead of being an ugly, silver and black afterthought, they are shiny, elegant, always white, rectangles, which are subtle, yet pleasing to look at. English plugs are never wonky on the wall. The plugs sit next to each other, rather than on top of each other, and there are switches for each plug that allow you to keep an appliance plugged in, but stop the flow of electricity. The switch is always to the right of the plug as you look at it.

This is the bit that gets me: each switch has a fire engine red top that when off is unseen. But as soon as you turn it on there is a little bit of red staring at you. Although that is not the bad bit. If there is a plug in the socket there is no problem at all ... only when the socket is empty does it bug me. Somehow, no matter where I am in a room, if a switch is on and empty, it catches my eye.

One of the most torturous times I have ever experienced was sitting in the chemistry classroom at school. I took chemistry as one of my three specialist subjects, so was in that classroom, also designed as a lab, almost every day. As I sat intently listening to our teacher, looking up at him or the board and then looking back at my book to take notes, my eye always passed over the red dots in front of me. There were hundreds, well, eight, right in front of me, and then another six on the teacher's desk. That didn't count the ones that I knew were right behind me and the ones on the desk to my left if I stretched slightly to have a look. The switches weren't always left on, and sometimes there was a plug in them, but the majority of the time they were empty and on, and the little red beacon would call to me. 'Oh Lyndsay! I'm on ... and empty!'

I wasn't as good at chemistry as the three students who sat in the row in front of me, but I was determined to do well. But there were times when I just couldn't

concentrate on the intricacies of benzene rings while being stared at and surrounded by red dots. In the end, I started to turn them off before class started, but this invited 'What are you doing?' questions from the rest of the class. I shrugged and told them that I was just turning off the plugs. Unfortunately they noticed that I did it quite often.

'You know it won't shock you right?' Tom, one of my classmates, asked.

I tried to stay casual and not show him that it bothered me: 'Yeah, I know,' I said, not giving any other explanation. Tom was the first to catch on and because he and some of the other guys thought it was fun to wind people up, he encouraged his friends to follow his lead: to make it their mission in chemistry to turn on every empty socket they could. The class divided in two as some followed him and others joined me in trying to keep the switches off.

We would have socket fights. As soon as the teacher turned to write on the board, one of the evil members of the class would dash to the nearest plug and turn it on. I would squirm in my seat and try not to look at that red dot, but it truly would be the center of my vision. As soon as the teacher turned his back, I would sneak up and turn it off again, except that as the term progressed, they would get clever and turn the furthest one away from me on, leaving me no chance of turning it off.

It got bad. While house hunting with my family, I would inadvertently turn off the plugs in other people's houses. Mum had to tell me twice to stop, because I didn't realize that I was doing it. I could walk down the corridor in my boarding house and lean down to hit the switch without breaking step. Every night before I went to bed I would look down the corridor just to make sure that the four sockets were all turned off.

Being in America has taken me away from the need to look out for stray red switches. Luckily it does not work that way here. Maybe the separation will cure me, get it out of my consciousness. Who knows? I guess I will find out in May when I go back to the land of the little red dots for good. Fortunately, for the past four years the problem has not distracted me from learning about Shelley or King Henry VIII, and I can live happily in my normal little world without worrying about little red dots. All I have to worry about now is making sure that my friends serve any pasta but spaghetti when I go over for dinner. Unlike the plugs, I have a perfectly good reason for not liking spaghetti. It has a horrible tendency to slip down my throat before I have had the chance to chew it properly, so that one end of the spaghetti is down my throat, but the other is still in my mouth. I think I am quite justified in wanting to concentrate on talking to my friends who have very nicely asked me over for dinner, rather than on not allowing spaghetti to stray. Not strange at all.

I think that my friends are weird for enjoying something that is so yukky. Why would they want something to trickle down their throat and give it a tickle? Do they find this pleasant? Even the thought of spaghetti down my throat makes me gag, just a little bit. Of course normal people wouldn't want that. I do try and chew it properly, it is only pasta after all, and tomato pasta is my favourite meal, but who invented something that gross? I shudder at angel hair. Tapeworms, more like. Angel hair wiggles just like a tapeworm would and even tries to avoid being mashed and why any normal person would want this sensation in their mouth is beyond me.

Normal people, like me, eat penne and other civilised pastas rather than worm pasta.

So I am not odd. I'm normal, because normal people should be rational and turn off plugs and eat good pasta. What would the world be like if it was filled with red dots and spaghetti? Unbearable.

You're English?

I walked into work and said five words: 'Hey Scott, how are you?' and immediately was met with a wall of:

'Oh My Gosh, are you from Britain?'

My heart sank. Now I was bound to get the usual information of this stranger's grandparents' ties back to jolly old England and his future plans for visiting the place he had never been, but 'would just love to go!' and I couldn't leave. I put my bag down and pretended to look for something right at the bottom. 'Yes, I'm English,' I muttered, praying that this would be the end of the conversation.

'I just love your accent,' he said, his face red with excitement and expectation.

'Talk some more!'

Even when I first arrived four years ago, I don't think that 'talk some more' was something I liked to hear. What was I supposed to say? You should try it sometime: demand that one of your friends talk and I can almost guarantee that they will ask what they should talk about. Having a conversation with someone is completely different to

being *told to* talk. If he wanted to hear me talk, he could keep the conversation going by treating me like a human being and asking the normal questions people ask when they first meet. Then, not only would he get to hear me talk, but his chances of me letting him have the chance to talk with me in the future would be much higher. Double luck for him. As for demanding that I talk, well, this almost guarantees that I will either do my very best to avoid talking or leave the room.

Luckily my boss came in and asked me to work on a project in the other room and so I was spared any detail of his family.

In my four years in the United States I have met many different people. Some have been seasoned world travellers, some interested in travelling and actively saving to do so, some who watch the news and some who are not interested in leaving or learning about anywhere but the states that surround them. It is usually members of this last group who do not expect variation in talk and hyperventilate when I speak.

'No way! Are you from England?' again.

Is it really so strange that I should be here?

I have a 'proper' English accent, or so I am told by English friends who would know, and apparently I sound like an English teacher or someone from an old television show. This generally enchants people and I am regularly informed that I have the nicest accent they have ever heard. Yay for me. The trouble is that I can't help my accent. It really has nothing to do with me, it just is. I didn't consciously decide that I would groom my accent so that I could sound delicious. I just talked and it came out. I also worry that people prize me, that they enjoy having me around for my voice and not for me. My accent makes me 'cute', but am I cute before I've spoken? I don't know because it is hard

to get an honest answer to this question. 'Of course you are cute!' they answer. 'Your accent is just a bonus'. Great.

At home, accents vary wildly from one town to another. In a matter of often minutes drive I could go from understanding the accent perfectly, to not having a clue. I went to boarding school in Somerset, and down there they speak Wurzel. It's hard to describe what they sound like, but they are probably the equivalent of American Southern, and carry the same stereotypes: slow, stupid. My accent does not give away which part of the country I am from, and so I was not used to being singled out immediately. Perhaps this is the legacy of boarding school. Obviously, it is easy to tell *which* country I am from. Or rather, I would expect that it would be, but it seems that some ears are not as finely tuned as others. My boyfriend is Australian. It surprises me that some cannot tell the difference between our accents when they are so different. His vowels are obviously funny and mine are obviously not. I wonder why it is that so many people I have encountered in the States cannot hear the difference between our accents. I am going to make it my mission at home to find out if this is an American phenomenon or not. Here, both of us have been asked if we are from '*up north*' and while I am happy to acknowledge that often this is said in jest, sometimes it is serious. I like to reply that yes, I am from *up north*, smile and move on. It is not worth the bother of endless questions and the details of family history of which Americans are so proud.

If I know that I am in a situation where I am likely to be found out, sometimes I try to hide my accent to avoid attention. I dumb it down so that I might be mistaken for an American. I talk quieter and I mumble to try and disguise my voice. However, there are people who can spot the accent a mile away. I think my quickest is just three words.

When I say, 'please may I have peas and carrots with my pasta', in the dining room, the jaw of the person in the queue behind me drops. Their eyes bulge and their chin extends to unimaginable lengths. They continue to stare until I leave with my food and unfortunately, I am polite and so don't say what is screaming in my head. It is not only students who lose all manners over my accent. Even in restaurants I hear adults at tables surrounding mine whispering, 'Australia?' Then they turn their ears towards me and squint their eyes in concentration. To combat this, I have found that it helps to drop hints early into the conversation: 'So, when are you going to visit me in England?' or similar, so that they will stop wondering and we can all get on with our dinners.

I didn't realise that here I would become such a spectacle. That's really what I am a lot of the time. There are situations that I dread because I know that I will be exposed to a lot of new people that will demand my history and demand to share theirs with me. When they actually wish to have a conversation and not make me into a story to tell, I am more than happy to talk, but sometimes it's just not fun to be gawped at.

Steve's Squirrels

'Steve, I'm over here!' I said, leaning back on a rock and watching my boyfriend trying to take a photo.

It was no use, I was never going to get his attention away from the bloody squirrels. I was getting used to it, but I never thought that I would end up being second favourite to a squirrel.

'Hey, Lyndsay, look!'

I got up, looking behind me at the view that we weren't going to get a photo of, and walked over to where Steve was crouched on the ground looking underneath a big red rock but somehow managing to jump up and down on his heels to try to get me to hurry up.

'Can you see him? He's having a wash!' Steve pulled me down next to him and pushed my head to encourage me to look under the rock. My eyes took time to adjust to the shadows but I could see the little rat with a tail in the corner giving his face a wash, his little paws working over time with licking and rubbing, licking and rubbing. I had to

admit that it is hard to see an animal washing its face and not to think that it's cute, and Steve was obviously so excited that I didn't want to spoil it for him. But still, it was only a damn squirrel.

'Oh yeah, how cute,' I said.

We walked back to the car that we had abandoned on the side of the road in order to take a picture of a particularly spectacular view in Zion National Park, southern Utah. Surrounding us on all sides were steep red rocks and trees clinging onto the sides. I wondered how they ever got enough water. The heat hit me as I opened the car door even though it had only been building up for ten minutes. I had to remember to park it in the shade overnight so that the steering wheel wouldn't melt. We waited until some cooler air found its way into the car before getting in and blasting the air con at full blast. My foot stayed on the brake while going around the skinny national park roads. There was never enough straight road to get enough breeze to cool us down. Steve wasn't that interested. I looked over at him. He wasn't paying any attention to the grandeur of the scenery; his head was bowed attentively over the digital camera screen, his hand shading it from the sun. He tried to stretch his legs before putting the chair back: he always had to do that when we swapped seats. Back to the squirrels.

I had been stuck in a car with this squirrel lover for three weeks. They say that when you travel with someone you really get to see if you are compatible and Steve and I had been doing well so far, except for the lack of photos of me or us. Occasionally there were scenic photos, but only because the squirrel had climbed a tree and there happened to be something pretty in the background. I shook my head, rolled my eyes and turned back to the road.

Steve and I had been going out for about 5 months. Neither of us had expected that we would work out, especially because Steve was just in America for one semester and the last thing his Mum had said to him before he left Australia was not to get a girlfriend. That made me nervous to meet her! Anyway, we decided at the beginning that we would just have some fun, but here we were, 5 months later driving across the country and talking about me coming to study in Australia so we could stay together. We weren't the only ones that were surprised. On Steve's arrival in Asheville there had been much talk to the Sydney lifestyle and what it was like for him to work in a bar and get hit on all the time. Some of my friends found it hard to believe that he could actually be serious when he had seemed to be such a player. Whatever, he was mine now and I knew it.

I thought that I had had the perfect relationship while in high school, but I had been proved wrong. It is strange to learn that what you thought was the best you were ever going to get can be totally eclipsed. Steve and I had spent most of the past 5 months together non-stop and we hadn't had a single fight. There was nothing to fight about. Every time I got vaguely moody he would laugh at me and then I would start laughing and then we would have a tickle fight or something. That was as serious as it got before the road trip.

'What happens if we don't like each other anymore when I come to Australia?' I asked him as we left Arizona for Nevada.

This had been bothering me because we were about to be apart for 6 months before I turned up on his doorstep to live with him in Australia and his parents for 7 months. That could turn into a mess pretty quickly.

'I don't know, but I don't think we won't like each other. We're doing pretty well so far.' We had decided that if 5 weeks in a car worked then we would probably be ok and I should go ahead and apply for the study abroad program. And the only thing that was bothering me were the squirrels and there weren't any of them in Australia: problem solved.

It had almost been too perfect, surely something should have upset me by now? Well, he *had* dumped me in January, about a week into our 'relationship', Steve had decided that he didn't want to be tied down to just one person. He was in the great U.S. of A. and wanted to have some fun, dammit!

The next day we had acted as if nothing had changed, so my tears of the day before were a bit premature. It wasn't until Spring Break when he told me he loved me that I knew for certain that we were official again. Plus, he had been eating vegetables to try to impress me the whole time: not the actions of someone who isn't interested I don't think! He ate more broccoli than that he ever had before, or since. He hates the stuff, but did a good impression of someone who loved it for a whole semester. I don't know why anyone would choose broccoli over other vegetables to pretend to like. They are the strangest looking ones of the array that the cafeteria on campus served and peas would have been a much safer option. I don't even like broccoli! Ever since then I have tried to increase Steve's vegetable habits. He ate none and by sneaking a few on to his plate each day, now he likes peas and sweetcorn and even carrots! I think that the need to impress me made him try them in the first place, but then he found that he wasn't dead and that they actually tasted quite nice.

It's strange how we are influenced by other people, especially the ones we like quite a lot. I used to be a cold weather person. I loved to bundle up and sit in front of the fire at home. I used to have to move the cats out of the way because it was their favourite place too, but I'm bigger than them. Being outside and being warm but having a cold nose was so cosy and sweating and not being able to take anymore clothes off was not. In the cold you can always put something else on. The opposite is not true for the heat. Australia changed me, but the process started when I saw how much Steve loved the heat in Arizona.

Throughout the whole winter Steve wore flip-flops, or thongs as they are known in Australia, even in the snow. He and his roommate, also an Australian, kept getting ill when it was cold - I put it down to the flip-flops, but they denied it and said that they were just used to it being hot all the time. I would walk across campus in snow shoes and a ski jacket, holding hands with a flip-flopped, light jumper wearer. He wore summer clothes even when the sun only peeped through and his sunglasses were a permanent fixture. Seeing Steve bask in the heat showed me his natural environment, and explained his love of the sun. I didn't really own any summer clothes at the time of our road trip, so sat there sweating while he basked. It wasn't until we got to the outlet malls in Las Vegas where Steve made me buy some summer clothes that I realised how much of a difference they made. There were clothes that didn't stick to the skin? Who knew?! Steve isn't one to sit inside and during the summer it is much easier to be outside than in the winter. In Vegas we walked up and down the strip, in and out of hotels and casinos from 10am to 2am for three days solid. It was baking hot, something I was just not used to and I would start to flag much quicker than him.

'Steve, I'll need a drink soon', regularly came out of my mouth and I needed one not only for the fluid but also as an excuse to sit down out of the sun. It made my feet seem eight times heavier than usual, even after I splashed out and bought some flip-flops of my own. It was a lot of fun being outside with him. We took pictures underneath the Eiffel Tower and the dancing Bellagio fountains, watched street performances and got offered countless prostitution cards. We ended up with so many that we were able to practice making them click ourselves. We sat and people watched on our drink breaks and even pretended to be outside in the Venetian Casino with the fake painted roof. The Aladdin ceiling made rain. Apparently Steve was not the only person who loved being outside, in fact there were so many people in Vegas who did, that they faked it with painted roofs. Steve seemed to get his energy from the sun and he certainly looked healthier for it: he got colour in his face that looked as though it should be there all the time, but had gone on holiday during the Asheville winter.

Our next stop was at the beach in California. My family has a tradition of having to be the first one to touch the sea the first time we get to the beach so as soon as Steve parked the car, I dashed down to the water's edge, kicked my flip-flops off in the sand and paddled. The water was cold, but it felt good compared to the stiffness of the car. Seconds later, Steve whizzed by and disappeared under the waves breaking a few meters off shore. His head popped up a couple of seconds later and he looked back at me, shaking his hair and smiling. Apparently I hadn't noticed that he'd had his swimmers on in the car. I didn't realise he could be so prepared! He walked out of the surf towards me and splashed, laughing. I was still fully clothes, apart from my flip-flops, so did the usual girly scream and jump back as the cold water hit my legs, but he was having none of it.

'Come on!' he said, throwing his arm out to the Pacific. 'Look at it!'

I looked. It was massive. I mean, the sea always looks massive, but I knew that this one really was super massive and went all the way to Japan without interruption. We had bought me a bikini in Vegas in preparation for this moment, so I went back up to the car to slip it on and grab towels. The sand was hot under my feet, and I hadn't noticed on my way down to the water's edge. I hurried up because I didn't want to put my flip-flops back on, even though it would have protected me from the heat.

Bikini on, I made my way, wrapped in a towel back down to the water where Steve was jumping up and down in the waves. Around us there were people surfing and sun bathing, all looking stunning in their swimmers. Welcome to California, I thought. I put my towel on the sand near the high water mark and went tiptoeing into the water.

'It's better if you just run,' Steve yelled.

I smiled and nodded and knew that he was probably right but didn't want to do it anyway. I am not afraid of the water, I am a natural swimmer in the pool, but somehow going into the big massive ocean of salt isn't the same as diving into chlorine. Chlorine doesn't have seaweed for starters. Eventually I managed not to jump over a wave and so got completely wet. I waded over to Steve who held onto me as a bigger wave passed us.

'I can't reach,' I said.

He held my hand tighter as I got pulled away from him again.

'Don't you know how to dive under the wave?' he asked.

'No, what do you mean?'

'When you go under the wave and hold onto the sand until the wave has passed,' he said with the confidence of someone who had grown up and lived next the beach forever.

'Oh,' I paused, grabbing hold of him with two hands so that I didn't get battered by another passing wave. 'How can you hold onto sand? That doesn't make sense.'

'You just stick your hand in it so that you don't get washed around. So you know where you are,' he said, leading me into shallower water. 'Try it.'

We waited for the next wave that was big enough to knock me over and I watched as Steve disappeared under. I got knocked over as the wave broke on top of me and did a full, straight bodied flip under water. I came up, exhilarated, but a bit dizzy some meters away from Steve who was looking around for me. He came over to me and held my hand again.

'Ok, here's one, ready? Go.' This time he didn't let go of my hand and pulled me under and to the bottom of the water. I felt the sand with my other hand and dug my hand in. I couldn't get it in very far, but Steve was right there next to me. I could feel the water tugging at both of us in different directions so that we had to really hold on so not to be separated. Steve pulled me up again and I rubbed my eyes and saw that we had stayed under for the perfect amount of time it had taken for the wave to pass.

'How do you know when to come up?' I asked, sure that he had opened his eyes or something.

'You can just feel it as it goes over you,' he said, shrugging.

On the way back across the country we stopped for the night in a crappy little motel and decided that we should look at pictures from the day on his digi as it was still a

bit early for going to bed. The motel wasn't anything to shout about, in fact I was worried that I might end up shouting at the mice I imagined under the bed, but it was cheap. There was a bed and a shower and the door locked. That was good enough. As we laughed at photos of us posing outside the shop in Albuquerque where Steve had bought me blue stone kokopelli earrings, I realised that there would be no way I would be in this crappy hotel if he wasn't here with me. It was never dark, even with the curtains closed, and the shadows kept moving across the whole room because of the thousands of cars going past. Every now and then there was some extra flashing as the room was lit with red and blue. But as we turned off the light and settled down, it didn't matter because Steve was there. He might not be able to fight off armed robbers or anything like that, but he kept me safe, and kept me comfortable. If the only thing I had to worry about in our relationship was his squirrel fascination then things were going pretty well. It was probably only temporary tail envy anyway.

After our trip, Steve had to go back to squirrel-less Australia and leave me behind. Soon after I arrived back in the U.S. after spending 7 months in Australia with Steve, I remember walking to class and halfway there hearing a rustling. I stopped to look and there were two squirrels chasing each other across the leaves and up and down the tree trunks, their tails swishing this way and that, and their noses scrunching. Every now and then they would stop and pick up a nut before scampering off up another tree. One of them hid behind a branch, cowering behind it, hoping that its mate wouldn't see where he had hidden. I stood and watched them, and a picture of Steve crouching under that red rock popped into my head. His bouncing was just like the squirrel peeping out from

behind the branch, excited and ready to play. The other squirrel caught up with the first and they sat next to each other on the branch, calm and still, surveying their playground, before chasing each other again. Squirrels suddenly changed. Those two squirrels were Steve and I, how we'd been in America and Australia.

In 26 days Steve and I will be together at last after 2 years of world between us. At last we will be able to start our life together, where I slyly make him eat vegetables and he teaches me wonderful things I didn't know about the world.

Just a Thought

Whenever I fly back to the United States, I get off the aeroplane, find the gate at which my connecting flight is to leave from and make my self comfortable. If I have time, I get myself a bite to eat; if I am lucky I find a Subway and tuck into a sandwich. I always have a bottle of water. This leads to the inevitable needing of a wee. I finish my sandwich, put my half empty bottle in my bag next to my book and passport and look for the nearest toilet. Usually it is not too far away and off I go. Crossing the clean carpet, weaving through the other potential passengers who are keen not to miss their flights, I arrive at the entrance. I always double check that I am going into the right side. I never want to have one of those 'and I went into the men's room' stories. Airport toilets are generally quite clean and don't smell too bad, unlike the ones on the plane that I try to avoid if I can help it. On the plane I don't like having to put my shoes back on and the floor is always wet, so shoes are needed. In the terminal, my shoes are already on and the staff work hard to keep the floors dry.

I glance at myself in the mirror and this is when I remember.

Oh yeah, the gaps.

It is something I always forget when I go home, and something that I am always reminded of as soon as I go to the toilet in the United States. Public toilets have gaps on each side of the door. Not small, discrete gaps, but gaps that make it hard to feel as though you are in private when you are in the cubicle. Often there is a mirror directly opposite the cubicles, and I know that if I am on the toilet and I can see that person washing their hands, they can see me just as well. What happens if I am about to unbutton my trousers and I look up and make eye contact in the mirror? Or if someone walks past and checks to see if my cubicle is empty and our eyes meet? I can't exactly ask them to avert their eyes, or re-button my trousers and move cubicles, because that would be admitting to both of us that a line had been crossed. A toilet cubicle is a private place and it would not be polite to admit that we peek into them.

Gaps were enough to give me stage fright on my first visit. I am used to it now, but every time I go to a public toilet I wonder what the point of these gaps is? Someone told me that the hinges need to be big and strong enough to hold toilet doors which are 'extra heavy', but I still don't understand why there are gaps. Are there gaps in the really heavy, steel, bullet-proof doors that protect important stuff in the White House? Perhaps they should share the technology.

I know gaps make it easy to see if the cubicle is occupied, but this can be achieved by bending down and looking underneath the door to see if there are shoes. Perhaps the point is convenience, but if the United States has had to go as far as putting viewing gaps in toilet doors just so people don't have to bend down, then I think that this is taking convenience to an extreme level of laziness.

I have to admit that I have been caught on the outside of the cubicle looking in. I don't mean to do it, and I suppose that I bow to the lord of convenience too. Plus, I think I would look a bit silly if I bent over to look for feet when it is obvious that I could just glance through the gap. Perhaps onlookers could mistake my avoidance of gaps for something a bit more sinister. And of course, the person in the cubicle could also see me bending over. It is very embarrassing to know that someone has seen me looking at them while they are on the toilet. And obviously I don't want to see anyone on the toilet! But sometimes it is just unavoidable.

When I fly home, I have to wait until I pass through immigration before I can go to the toilet. I forget that public toilet doors in the United Kingdom do not have gaps. When I enter the cubicle and turn to close the door and realise that it fully closes, I sigh. Some things really do just make more sense at home.