

Emotional Cartography:

Journeys Through Lands and Hearts

By Morland Matthews

Brooklyn

2024

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This book is a work of creative non-fiction. The events and characters portrayed within are based on true experiences, though some names, locations, and details have been altered to protect privacy, and certain events have been fictionalized for narrative cohesion and thematic emphasis. While efforts have been made to ensure the accuracy of the information and the integrity of the narrative, liberties have been taken in the creative portrayal of events and characters.

For permission requests, writing inquiries, or to contact the author, please email morland.matthews@gmail.com.

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Dedication

This book is lovingly dedicated to my wife, affectionately known as "The Baguette," who has once again played the multifaceted roles of soundboard, villain, hero, photographer, beta reader, auditor, editor, and love interest in this story. Her unwavering support and diverse contributions have been indispensable.

Furthermore, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to a constellation of individuals who have enriched my life with invaluable lessons. My appreciation encompasses, but is not limited to, my mom, dads, Elizabeth, Anne, Grecia, Michelle, Abraham, Javier, Yelena, Mary, Catalina, Evan, Alice, Luna, Luis, Kimberly, Wilmer, Alfredo, Violet, and Kaycee. Each of you has left an indelible mark on my journey, and for that, I am eternally grateful. Thank you all.

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To each of you, my sincere gratitude for your contributions, wisdom, and the unwavering support that helped bring this project to fruition.

Introduction

Welcome, dear reader! This unique travel memoir invites you on an introspective journey that can be experienced in two distinct ways. You may choose to immerse yourself in the narrative from start to finish or opt for a more exploratory approach by navigating through the Table of Contents to focus on specific Locations or Emotions that resonate with you. Whichever path you select, there is no wrong way to read this book.

To establish a meaningful connection with the story, we recommend beginning with the prologue, which sets the stage for the enlightening experiences to come. Once you've delved into the chapters that pique your interest, we encourage you to conclude your journey with the epilogue, tying together the insights gleaned from each tale.

This book is designed to embrace different reading styles, allowing you to engage with the stories in a way that feels most enjoyable and rewarding. Happy reading!

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Mary Wollstonecraft
"No man chooses evil because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks."

Prologue: Independence

Are we traitors? In about five hours, my wife Sandra, aka the scrumptious Baguette, and I – two born-and-bred inner-city Latinx Brooklynites – will fly toward Europe for the first time, en route to London for inspiration, to find pride in Ghent, and to learn about triumph in Paris. Ironically, today, Independence Day, we leave for England, our former colonizers, willingly. I have been awake in my cozy bed for over two hours, eager to arrive at the Old World and begin finding firsthand accounts of similarities between us, given America's overall fixation with alienation and distinction. Europeans must enjoy coziness as well. Perhaps we'll gain insights into new forms of coziness. Time will tell. Now, though, darkness limits my view to what lies within the blue glow of my cell phone, the same screen that will enlighten our journey with translations, facts, and maps. For this moment, though, the light allows me to see something way more important: Sandra, and the skewed head-wrap over her forehead. A half-dollar-sized dab of moisture rests near her lips. I hope her dreams are full of happy clients lauding, "You are the best interior designer in the world!"

We are not getting up for another half-hour. I lie there, appreciating the stillness, and try to think, but I get interrupted. "Can you get me a glass of water?" she murmurs, asserting her dominance, then gives me her back and falls asleep again. I shake my head and return to my thoughts. Even though I can rationalize that visiting Europe is an example of the blessings in our lives, thoughts and feelings are eating at me. This is the perfect opportunity for a school counselor to internalize and practice positive self-talk.

While I am thrilled with the possibility of seeing grand-slam tennis matches on the hallowed grass courts of Wimbledon, something is off. Even though I am salivating at the thought that we will be in Ghent, the unofficial vegetarian capital city of Europe, chugging Belgian beer and dipping Belgian waffles into syrup, I am not beaming. Granted, in a few days, we will be sauntering in Paris, through the streets that inspired some of my favorite movies, like *Banlieue 13* and *Amélie*; yet, my state of peace is challenged by three thoughts.

The first is Sandra's gripe with the royal family's mistreatment of her doppelganger, Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle, at least in part, for being multiracial like her. "It's racist," she says.

The second factor is a cocktail of toxic doubts that have slithered in and out of my mind since I first bought our flights six months ago. Will I be able to enjoy traveling on a plane and visiting faraway places without breaking down?

Last year, while touring my family's motherland, Nicaragua, I experienced a terrifying three days. I became afraid of things I once enjoyed: flying, the dark, tight spaces, thinning air, and the thought of being on an island scared me. The doctors I saw when I returned to the US told me I was fine, especially since my flight back to NYC was enjoyable and two weeks after the incident, I felt 100 percent normal again. But not knowing what caused my dreadful episodes is enough reason at 3:00 A.M. today to toss and turn in my bed. The thought of taking another trip abroad worries me.

The third factor is a lingering question: Are we sellouts for traveling to Europe, given its history of expansion over the lands of our Native American and African ancestors? Would we have been better off flying again to Sandra's *Puerto Rico* or *Cameroon* to learn more about ethnicities and histories tethered to our own? "*Know thyself*" is the maxim that brings this conflict to light.

By contrast, my dad would argue that we, and billions of amazing people, have existed because of the exact way history played out over the centuries. I brought these questions up to my mom yesterday over the phone and asked, "¿Qué piensas?"

"*Mi hijo*, if you come back ten days wiser, it'll be worth it."

"Great idea! I'll write a life lesson at the end of each day and show it to you when I get back."

"*Tu mamá tiene* many good ideas. And don't forget out there what your *abuela* used to say too, 'The smartest person in a room is the one who can achieve everything they want without attracting negative energy,'" she wags her index finger.

I hope that by the end of this trip, an expanded insight will have helped me come to better terms with these thoughts. After much deliberation, I convince myself, at least temporarily, that Mary Wollstonecraft could be right about evil deeds from the past and, more importantly, that the wise old man, with a long white beard and bushy eyebrows, whom I dream of becoming one day, is a person who has traveled to every continent. He sees the hypocrisy of living in America while wagging a finger at Europe over imperialism. He is also someone shrewd enough to listen to his mom and save on hotel fees by visiting friends Ethan, Clementine, and Shinobi, who are living there now. Everything we come across will make us more knowledgeable about race, wealth distribution, history, politics, and vegetarianism.

Should I start packing or wait another 15 minutes for my alarm to ring? The softness of our bed sheets and another fleeting recall of my nightmare trip twelve months ago keep me in bed. The cornucopia of emotions this trip is poised to evoke can simmer a few minutes longer.

LaGuardia to Heathrow: Anxiety

Our most important mission this Independence Day morning is to board flight BA178 by 7:55 A.M. without a panic attack, or, if necessary, despite one. A secondary, yet still valuable, goal is to find our gate with enough time to calmly buy and consume a warm, loaded bagel. Avoiding the panic attack may be impossible without the peace of mind and nutrients that the secondary goal would provide. The *Baguette* and I book a ride-share to increase our chances of making all this happen. This decision is unusual for us, given our frugality, but the crucial nature of our tasks and potential subway delays make it necessary.

“What do you think it's gonna smell like?” Sandra randomly asks me in the cab, her eyes barely open as she reads her phone.

“You mean the bagel?”

“No, London.”

“Are you even awake right now? I don't know. Earl Grey Tea?”

“This article I'm reading says car exhaust and flowers,” she shrugs. Sandra is our tour guide, and she takes her planning jobs very seriously. I wouldn't be surprised if she's doing some last-minute cramming in her studies and reading articles on what to expect in London for first-time travelers.

We arrive three hours early and get checked in about forty-five minutes later. Breaking the bank was worth it.

Once through the terminal's security points, we stand in line for an hour to order a long-awaited bagel. Hunger will weaken my spirit, so we need to check it off the list.

“One toasted, scooped-out whole-wheat everything bagel with vegetable cream cheese, please,” Sandra gleams.

“Sorry, we only have plain,” a woman points to an overflowing cardboard box of bagels behind her. “We don't have cream cheese, but you can have butter,” she pulls out a handful of butter packets from another box and places them into our bagel's brown paper bag.

As we turn and begin to walk away, she suggests, “Do you want them toasted?” We hear the offer, but it's too late to accept; our teeth have already sunk into the first bite of the white glazed dough. “It's okay, thank you,” Sandra mumbles to her, then whispers to me, hoping for reassurance, “One cold bagel isn't going to ruin our day, right?” I shake my head. While this establishment might not earn any Michelin stars today, we are grateful that our food preparer got up early to tend to us. The distraction is a welcome relief from my flight phobia.

When the flight crew begins boarding, a tiny yet insidious grain of doubt whispers into my ear. Its familiar tone makes it hard to ignore. I question again how comfortable I will be with the enclosed cabin of the plane. I feel like a bull being led to a mental slaughterhouse, one who is counting on the sharpness of his mind and the power of his preparation to break the constraints holding him down. With each step nearer to the plane, my body temperature and blood pressure rise. The air grows thicker and heavier. Self-doubts become louder and more intrusive. Will the seven-foot

-wide by eight-foot-high jet bridge leading to the plane be too tight? Will the 31” seat pitch and 17.5” width be too constricting? If I am unable to rein in my brain right now, we are going to experience an uncontrollable problem.

While waiting for our seat assignments at the gate counter, I gain relief by convincing myself that if I sit by a window, the expansive view will put me at ease. Also, if I am on the aisle, I will have extra elbow room and breathing space. The mind games are working; I am walking taller. Furthermore, I remind myself that I packed aspirin, which my doctor in Nicaragua recommended to alleviate head pressure. The Dramamine in my pocket will make me drowsy if the anxiety becomes overwhelming. Distraction is key.

“Are you OK?” Sandra leans in and asks under her breath, holding up her passport and driver’s license. Her right eyebrow raises slightly.

“I’m good,” I respond sincerely but still wary of the unknown.

“You got this, Morland!” are the last words of encouragement I give myself before entering the jet bridge. It’s insane that over a year ago, everything I loved about flying – the white noise, the idea of floating on air, and hours of unperturbed time to read and binge movies – I took for granted. Peace of mind, thanks to my chill family and cool wife, was always a given, but not anymore. Now it requires careful, tedious planning. But how sustainable is all that consistent effort, I wonder?

Upon reaching row fifty-two of fifty-five, Sandra turns back and forces a tight-lipped smile. Our surprise seating assignment is in the back of the plane, smack in the center of a four-passenger middle aisle. On paper, we couldn’t be in a worse place. But, amazingly, the old me who loved flying takes charge. I stuff my carry-on under my chair and slip into my assigned slot without a worry in the world. I am feeling so well that I prepare myself to save the *Baguette* from what seems like a brewing emotional incident of her own. Thankfully, her grumbling is due to sleepiness; I can tell because her eyes keep closing mid-flare.

“Why did you-zzzz-sit us-zzzz-back here?” she asks while nodding off.

“The lil *Baguette* is sleepy. You want to take a nap?”

“No, the party just started,” she perks up.

After settling down and perusing the most distracting entertainment options, we agree on the animated movie *'Isle of Dogs.'* By chance, its theme of xenophobia is common in political debates today, given our current government’s strategies to protect its citizens and the economy. We only see about ten minutes of the film before pausing it for an unexpected nap. We continue watching it an hour later. Coincidentally, our friends and hosts, Ethan and Clementine, live on Canary Wharf, on an island called the *Isle of Dogs*. When I share this fun coincidence with Sandra, she does not share my excitement. She’s too busy dancing with delight in her mind over something else. The rest helps her recognize a positive aspect of our seating arrangement.

“Hey, guess what, sitting in the back of the plane is actually great: it puts us next to the bathroom and gives us first dibs on movie snacks from the cart.”

“I think it’s also safer if we crash,” I whisper. “You see how much I care for you.”

“I think you are right,” she gives me a thumbs up.

The second movie I enjoy is Jim Carrey’s best performance in one of my favorite stories, *'Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.'* It tells the story of a man who tries to erase a painful relationship memory from his past while finding someone new to love. Everyone can relate to a moment or person in their lives they once wanted to forget. I enjoy this movie again, even though I’ve watched it at least twice before, and only skim to my favorite parts this time. The emotional final scene reminds me of what happens when I underestimate the consequences of my decisions and misjudge the motives behind other people’s choices. These are old lessons, therefore not eligible for my list. Still, I try to keep them in mind for my family, students, and when considering my aversions to taking this trip.

Sandra leans in, “Is that a tear?”

“You have to be a monster if this movie doesn’t touch you right here,” I point to my heart

“I’ll give it a shot someday... maybe,” she grins.

“Why have you been moving around so much? You okay?” I ask.

“No.”

The anxiety mind tricks I’ve been practicing, mostly on autopilot, seem to be working. Trusting the autopilot is key because, in this case, overthinking is dangerous. I’ve been so successful, in fact, that my claustrophobia parasite appears to be test driving a new host. Sandra has spent the last three and a half hours in a king-of-the-hill battle with her other seatmate. Their shared armrest is the summit, and her elbow has lost every encounter so far.

But, just now, halfway into our flight, an opportunity to claim the hill presents itself. Sandra sees an opening in his guard. The man unlocks his arm, stands, and walks to the bathroom. Like a panther-queen hiding in the shadows, her joint pounces on the armrest. She has secured the space rightly owed to her. *Baguette's* victory is sweet, and her elbow revels in her dominance. However, like other champions before her, Sandra is only able to enjoy her spoils for a brief time before an even stronger rival, her bladder, challenges her. Losing the armrest on her own terms is better than losing to him, so she goes to the bathroom, still a victor in her heart.

After the movie, I begin to prepare for the second half of our ride. I tell Sandra I want to write for an hour or so and then we can watch another movie together. While we are discussing our plans, the pilot addresses us and states, "We will be landing shortly." That hour I imagined we had slept was more like three hours. We are a little bothered that we were unable to do all the fun activities we had prepared for the plane, such as trip planning, reading, and writing. The six-hour and fifty-minute flight was unbelievably delightful and gives me the confidence to believe that if I can turn the most arduous leg of this trip into something amusing, then the rest of it has to be marvelous.

Heathrow and Tube: Cynicism

Will our experience living in NYC allow us to blend right in, or will it not matter, I wonder? While walking through customs and sniffing around for any distinct whiffs of London air, a smartly dressed woman at the airport stops us and smiles. This is a wonderful welcome. I like how assertive people are with their friendliness here compared to New York, I think.

“Hi! So where will you be staying?”

“In London,” Sandra proudly shows Ethan's address.

“Are you familiar with the neighborhood?”

I glance at the address Sandra is showing her. “No.”

“Why did you choose this location?”

“We are staying with a friend. Why do you ask?” Sandra strokes the nape of her neck, seemingly worried for a moment. It's unclear whether the woman is worried for us or because of us.

“It's not a typical tourist location.”

“Is something wrong with that location?” I run my hand over my head.

“No,” she leans back.

“Maybe my friends live there because the rents are a little more affordable than in Central London. Does that sound right?” I shrug.

“Yes, that's true. I just like to know what people are doing here and why. Can I take a photo of you?”

I ruffle up, unable to believe we are running into our first Brexit supporter so early in our trip. She is making sure that people like us do not use our 'fake' vacation to stay here illegally. The photo she just took will go to the UK Home Office if we even think about staying. My crossed arms grow tighter with each perceived slight until a question dawns on me. *Is it possible that this woman with a UK Immigration Services badge in a Customs booth is merely doing her job?* For the sake of mental health and to keep an open mind for my pseudo-research, I accept this logical explanation and continue analyzing our surroundings. Perfume from boutiques and the chatter of children with their families surround us as we search for the terminal's exit.

Sandra appreciates the cleanliness of the airport and the ease with which we can navigate its facilities.

“I am impressed that their bathrooms have cloth hand towels. Why don't JFK and LaGuardia Airports have these?” she says.

“Is this more eco-friendly than paper towels and air hand-dryers?”

Thanks to Sandra, who is overseeing navigation, and the help of airport staff, we encounter no problems either finding the lavatories or the Piccadilly Tube. We are both looking forward to seeing our friends and learning more about their life in London over the past three years.

Ethan was our roommate when he attended graduate school in New York, and we met Clementine when she visited him from California during his breaks from school. What started as a business arrangement turned into a friendship and led to countless memorable moments. Ethan hosted two 'make your own sushi and sashimi' evenings in our home. He also taught us how to shop at our local Chinese supermarket and accompanied that with lessons on how to prepare delicious steamed buns and scallion breakfast pancakes. They both joined us in the painfully freezing Coney Island polar bear plunge. Ethan played poker with us and didn't sue us when one of our rickety wooden chairs snapped beneath him in the middle of a hand. Two years ago, we visited him in Taiwan and met his mom. Now, here we are in a subway station, excited to meet our friends again.

One of our first observations about the Tube is its width. The distance appears to be about one-third narrower than the subways in NYC. Also, based on physical appearance, the people on the train could be teleported to NYC and fit in perfectly. Sitting in front of me is a serious-

looking woman who appears to be of African descent. Beside us is another woman with South American Indian facial features. She resembles my neighbor back home. We make brief eye contact when she catches me trying to assess whether she speaks Spanish. Both women dress casually and slump their shoulders, seemingly after a long workday. A white couple dressed in sneakers and ripped jeans stands by the door, holding each other.

“People here seem to be mostly the same as in New York,” Sandra adjusts her luggage. “I expected a lot more white people.”

Except for the tightness of the space and the yellow and blue poles, it feels like I am in an NYC subway headed home from JFK airport. The sliding doors even have a bit of graffiti that was cleaned off. The blur of stations we are leaving behind brings to mind how quickly this trip could end and our need to slow it down by finding joy in every moment.

A second human interaction on our commute to Ethan and Clementine’s apartment occurs via escalator while we are leaving the subway and ascending onto the surface of London. The air begins to cool slightly. An older couple reprimands us for standing on the left side of the escalator instead of the right.

We slide over, but they continue to murmur about the posting of the rules along the side of the moving stairs. I share their irritation with these matters. We are comrades in this battle. However, I would never remain upset with someone who corrects their mistakes. I wonder for a moment if their persistence is rooted in them seeing us as a threat or as immigrants looking to stay here illegally. Or more likely, perhaps bunions or arthritis are making neighborliness and the act of standing difficult for these seniors. A gram of doubt stays, so I tuck my chin.

“You think those two are Brexit supporters?” Sandra breathes deep, “Hopefully not.” I am not sure if she’s breathing deeply because she’s annoyed with me for being overly political or with them for potentially being nationalists.

How embarrassing, despite our self-proclaimed wonderful social skills, our first two human interactions have been duds. The jet lag and recycled air must be messing with our social game.

We stare up at the mouth of the subway exit and wait in anticipation of what Ethan’s neighborhood looks and smells like. I am imagining a town composed mostly of three to four-story row houses like those found in our neighborhood back home and much of New England’s residential communities.

Canary Wharf: Happiness

What Sandra and I observe at Canary Wharf contests our expectations of what London would look like, based on Beatles music videos and other media. Upon surfacing through a large glass semi-oval exit, we are surprised by the binary light patterns of skyscrapers. The architecture's vibrance is cool, like in a Neo-Tokyo sort of way. A green Jubilee Park surrounds us.

"The air smells soapy. Did someone just scrub the floors and walls clean for us?" Sandra asks.

"Thank you, London!" I yell.

Two cars hum up a quiet street, while the tap of heels echoes off the ground behind us. "Never seen this before anywhere," Sandra remarks as we walk up to an empty mini-tennis court, enclosed in glass with six rows of black stadium seats.

"We have to be at Wimbledon today at 2:00 in the morning," I say.

"You think Ethan and Clementine wanna go with us?"

My eyes widen. "Regardless, we should have asked. I messed up," I admit, twisting my lips.

"No worries. Let's tell them now when we see them. They'll forgive us for forgetting... I hope. Worst case scenario, we'll lose the respect of one of the coolest people we know," her lip quivers.

"Yeah, no biggie," I bow my head.

We call Ethan and tell him we have arrived and will reach his apartment in about ten minutes. Despite our efforts to dissuade him, he decides to pick us up. We wait for him on the raised benches by the mini-tennis courts, appreciating the juxtaposition of architecture and greenery.

"That mini-tennis court would be a handball court in New York," I point out.

"But in a chained fence, not a fancy glass wall," she purses her lips. "And people might still be in there playing."

"That mini-tennis court would be a handball court in New York," I point out.

"But in a chained fence, not a fancy glass wall," she purses her lips. "And people might still be in there playing."

"I just got annoyed and can't believe that the thousands of hours I spent playing handball would've been thousands of hours on the tennis court if I'd been born here. Could've turned that skill into a tennis scholarship or a Wimbledon trophy. But no. Just imagine if all those really nasty kids that played handball would've played tennis instead. There'd be like 50 Monfils out there instead of just one."

"Don't get angry, get better. So, you can kick bootie now. Besides I never saw you play, so I can't confirm nor deny that statement about your possible tennis greatness derailment. On a different topic though I can't believe we played in the same handball parks as teens for years and never met."

"You're right about your first point and that's crazy," I shake my head. "But everything worked out."

"I was hot, so I'm not sure that teenage you would've had the guts to talk to me back then."

"You're probably right," I concede, pointing with my chin.

"I was hot, so I'm not sure that teenage you would've had the guts to talk to me back then."

"You're probably right," I concede, pointing with my chin.

Forty feet across from us, chairs clank and glasses clink at an outdoor bar. A lone woman sits at its counter, checking her phone as the staff cleans up around her. "I hope she didn't get stood up," Sandra clenches her fist.

"You sound embittered."

"That's never happened to me, but I did have a guy wait several hours at a bar to see me. Wasn't my fault I was late, though."

"FYI, if your hair was the problem, that's still your fault. Nevertheless, if this woman did get stood up, I feel bad for the next innocent guy she dates. He's going to pay dearly for this."

"Your wounds run deep. Poor baby, come here. Whoever that was that hurt you badly isn't here anymore," she hugs me. "That's my job now."

Ethan joins us a little less than ten minutes after we sit.

"You confused me for a second when you said tennis mini-courts. But I figured it out." Ethan taps his head. "Those are Padel courts," he points. "The mini-courts are far from here. Padel's big here," he laughs. "You use the walls too in that sport."

"Ohhhh, never heard of that, and we're here to expand our minds, right Morland, so this is good," Sandra says.

I nod emphatically.

Ethan opens his arms wide and gets closer to us. Everyone bear-hugs and begins to catch up. The last time we had all seen each other was in 2015 when we visited him in Taiwan before he married Clementine. We ask about the friends and family we became familiar with on our last meetup.

"My mom's good. She visited me," he says.

"Your mom's terrific. Still smile thinking about the incredible vegetarian restaurant she took all of us to in Taiwan," says Sandra.

"It was the best, most heart-warming vegan meal experience of my life. That handwritten menu they gave us is hanging on our wall back home, right now," I say.

His dad is also well, but his aversion to flying has kept him away. Ethan also tells us that his friend Arron, a former roommate in NYC, dropped in from Israel recently. His marriage to Emily is going well. Sandra and I are also proud to have known them before they got married.

Our late walk to the apartment is a peaceful stroll through a still-evolving metropolis. The only action comes from tired commuters heading home for a late supper. Ethan leads us inside a brightly lit, large glass building about five stories tall. I wonder if this centerpiece is their new abode. Once inside, we pass a flight of stairs that descends to the Piccadilly Line, the same subway line Sandra and I exited earlier. We realize now that our stop is part of a shopping center. The rows of closed storefronts inform us that this place will be bustling in the morning. "I am trying their coffee tomorrow morning," Sandra says, eyeing the presumptuous Italian coffee shop in the center of the square. While walking out of what I had incorrectly assumed five minutes ago was Ethan's apartment building, we learn more about the neighborhood. Now, we rely on amber streetlights and glowing illumination from two restaurants to light our way.

For our first taste of local acclimation, Ethan shares that Canary Wharf is a new financial center in London, expanding rapidly due to the institutions moving in to take advantage of the open building space and cheaper rents. This new population is motivating the addition of investments to the old neighborhood.

According to Ethan, growing interest in business is a catalyst for the newness and convenience around us. Next, we walk over a pedestrian bridge whose mast-shaped suspension cables lean outward instead of inward and appear to grasp only one side of the structure.

"This is one of the fanciest little bridges I've ever seen," I add.

"Looks like a harp," Sandra chimes in.

"Was built in 1997," Ethan shares, sounding like a proud uncle.

"Only looks a few years old," she replies.

The futuristic look stands out further given its backdrop. Across from us to the right, on a promenade, stands a row of quaint traditional, triangular-roofed, three-story homes. They look out of place amidst the modernity around us. Equally charming is a boat to our left with tall masts but no sails. After crossing the water, we reach four closed food stations and repurposed trucks. They will be offering café goods, Mediterranean, and other delicious lunches tomorrow to

the thousands of people working in the buildings above us. The most interesting stand is a red, chubby, retired fire truck that serves Mexican/Cuban food.

"I like this truck," Sandra scans the menu.

"Their food is delicious. Clementine and I ate here several times. Reminds me of the delicious Mexican restaurants near our old apartment in Bay Ridge."

"Like you said. If we didn't already have amazing Mexican food back home, we would be in line here tomorrow," I say.

Further along, three high-rise condominiums are under construction. They line the sidewalks as we come up to Ethan's home. His building is a recent construction that requires us to crane our necks back to see all twenty stories.

"Your building looks like a giant stone and glass Jenga game," Sandra comments.

"On stilts," I contribute.

"You're right," Ethan chuckles.

An unusually tall glass entrance allows us to see the massive lobby's ultra-big mirror, rows of vertical wooden beams on the walls, and heavy use of marble. We take an elevator to the fourteenth floor.

Ethan opens the door to their apartment, and Clementine's ear-to-ear smile greets us in the foyer.

"Hi! So happy to see you. How was your trip?" she says.

"It was great, felt way shorter than expected," Sandra responds, spreading her arms for a hug.

"I couldn't believe how quick the trip felt," I also reach out for a hug.

"Come in, come in, make yourself at home."

We enter their sanctuary. To the left of Clementine is something Ethan prized greatly back in Brooklyn, his golf bag. In the living room, I notice floor-to-ceiling windows with beautiful views of London. A practice putting carpet lies on the floor beside them, next to two putting clubs and four balls. The religious books on their coffee table remind me that Sandra and I attended his baptism in Chinatown.

"Are we your Godparents?" I ask half-jokingly while pointing to the book.

"No," he shakes his head vigorously while smiling.

"Have you found anything unique or unusual so far between the apartments in London, New York, or LA?" Sandra asks them.

"They are smaller here but more *designy*," Clementine replies.

Ethan holds his chin, "We also don't have a 'super'."

"Really?"

They both nod.

Ethan and Clementine have a warm living space with beautiful views of London's city landscape. We are happy to see them together in high spirits.

It is wonderful to be sitting and talking with them. They stay up with us chatting until about one in the morning. It is late for a work night, so Sandra asks Clementine, "When do you normally go to sleep?"

"We don't usually go to bed before midnight."

I wonder if she is saying this to make us feel less guilty for keeping them up so late. Sandra and I normally pack up around 9:30 P.M., so we appreciate their thoughtfulness. During our catch-up and apartment rundown, Ethan suggests that we postpone our planned trip to Wimbledon, in three hours, to Friday. He reasons that we should rest. I tell him that we, meaning Sandra, spent weeks planning every moment of this vacation. The team is prepared to break the night despite the risk of faulty brain functions resulting from sleep deprivation.

After processing Ethan's suggestion further, I understand that he wants us to postpone our Wimbledon trip to Friday so that he and Clementine can request a three-day weekend and join

us. This is wonderful, although it will require the cancellation of a six-hour walking tour we had scheduled for Friday and hours of meticulous, minute-by-minute planning by Sandra. But, in return, we get to spend more time with the two of them. Sandra looks over at me, I nod, then back at them.

“No worries, we’ll fix it so that we can all go together.”

“Are you sure it won’t interfere with your plans?” Ethan smiles.

“We will move our walking tour to tomorrow instead,” Sandra nods.

The four of us also agree on meeting up for dinner, and Clementine teases the possibility of a surprise guest joining us. With our activities settled for the next few days, we prepare for bed.

Ethan and Clementine show us their guest room, which has a large white fluffy bed and tall white curtains. A small bureau in the room has a piece of parchment paper with Chinese calligraphy.

Sandra points to it, “This looks very nice.”

“His mom made it for us as a wedding gift,” Clementine grins.

“She was awesome when we met her,” I add.

“I know,” Ethan says.

After exchanging goodnights, Sandra and I decide that we will allow ourselves to sleep as much as necessary to feel energized during tomorrow’s self-guided tour. We clean our teeth, jump on the big fat white cumulus cloud in the middle of our room, and rush to fall asleep.

“Are you forgetting something?” Sandra asks in the dark.

“My life lesson. But today’s not even a full day.” I steeple my fingers. “Got it.” I take my iPad out of my bag and write,

“Lesson 1: Fear is no match against a perfectly timed distraction.”

She peeks at my screen, “True. It worked for you on the plane. You should also add that, going forward, if we can’t pick up our friends or family at the airport, we sure as hell will go pick them up at the train station near our apartment, like Ethan showed us.”

While dozing off, I can’t believe that I survived the flight, incident-free, despite eight months of doubt. The nagging question, “What if I lose it on the plane?” never left me. But not only did I make it through the flight, I enjoyed it. Our familiarity with everything, from the language to the subway, is making us feel at home.

Sandra and I have so much to look forward to tomorrow. Along with viewing and learning about the majesty of Buckingham Palace and the Tower of London, we will also hope to enjoy something valuable to lovers of art and friendship. We plan to visit The National Gallery and meet an unexpected dinner guest thanks to Clementine and Ethan. My duo cannot wait.



Thank you for joining us on this captivating journey through "Emotional Cartography: Journeys Through Lands and Hearts." We hope the paths we've traversed together have sparked curiosity, resonance, and a thirst for more adventures. As our sample voyage concludes, the full expanse of our explorations awaits your discovery.

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