

India



by Laura Katirayi

Terminal Love

by Jay Steere

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I have always loved airports. I love their undulating rooflines of metal and glass, the smooth walls of bird's-eye maple, the endless circulation of people and the duty-free shops where everything, despite the tax breaks, is always too expensive. When I'm in airports, I savor my layovers, fawning over magazine sections for half an hour before I buy a *New Yorker*, which I never usually read—and a role of Mentos and sit down in a quiet, unused gate to watch the airplanes taxi in, refuel and then begin their slow creep back to the tarmac. A whole world exists within walking distance. People flood the stores like it is Christmas every day, and moving walkways carry us past each other at a steady, almost eerie, pace.

When I lived in Tallahassee, I would take walks at night when the humidity settled on the grass, and peeper frogs mated in a pulsating wet depression of noise. Overhead, airplanes would fly across the southeast part of town where most of the poorer neighborhoods were. The one where children ran around barefoot during school hours, and where throngs of sad black faces returned to concrete-block houses still wearing their bright fast food polo shirts and nametags. The one where I lived in a brick one-story building built for new G.I. students after the Korean War, and populated with many international students who had concluded, like me, that it was good enough for now.

It didn't matter where the planes were going. I just wanted to be on one of them, flying off to some Midwest hub or arriving in a colder climate that would accommodate my northeast outfits. It was the way, I imagined, that I would be visiting my girlfriend Danielle when I moved three thousand miles to the exact opposite side of the continental U.S. I didn't know when I would be making the trips, but I had decided that they would be worth it. It was simply a matter of making priorities, budgeting for the experience and then finding the time. Whenever we would consider the unspoken doubts of those people all around us, Danielle would break into "They Don't Know" by Kirsty MacColl: "They don't know about us / And they've never heard of love."

The last truly enjoyable flight I took was to England on September

10th, 2001. I drank too-sweet wine, watched movies on a tiny screen, and fell asleep with complimentary slippers on my feet. It was only a day later when our study abroad orientation leader stood up in front of us and said “Now if we could all get quiet for just a minute...” Then just a few days after that, my friend Mehdi and I booked tickets from Norwich to Amsterdam on Royal Dutch Airlines. It wasn’t easy getting to the airport. It turned out there was no bus that went directly there, and after asking a driver, we were let out at a nondescript intersection and pointed in the right direction, walking through briars and kicking soda cans with unfamiliar, quintessentially British names like “Lilt.” When we got to the airport, we found it to be sparsely populated with black-suited men occupying entire rows of seats by themselves, and janitors sweeping the floor as if at any time they might declare the whole place closed and send us all home.

When we went to the security check-in, I couldn’t stop myself from laughing when they patted Mehdi down, squeezing the pockets of his gray hoodie and cargo pants. I was waved through. He had to prove his camera was operational, and I was dismissed with a quick “that’s fine, then.” “It’s because I’m Iranian,” Mehdi said as he struggled to replace all his belongings in the right pockets. On our choppy ride over the English Channel, we carefully sipped our tea and then were quickly met, once we got to the city, with scheming hoteliers and drugged-up panhandlers. Flying, it seemed, had officially ceased being fun.

Over the next couple of years, my experiences with airports became less romantic. There were periods of excruciating anxiety when I regularly eyed long lines of travelers, and picked nervously at a scab or two on my cheek only to find that a flight had been delayed and an hour of boredom lay ahead of me. Camouflaged soldiers toted M-16s, people sneezed unabashedly beside me and zombie-like fast food employees shuttled out greasy meals to people they would never see again.

When I left Danielle, my cross-country drive had been a rather unremarkable experience. I had gotten a flat tire in Lawrence, Kansas, and my cousin had accidentally backed into my right fender when I stopped to see him in Denver, but other than that, the trip had seemed not a whole lot like the noble, solitary adventure I had expected. I stopped in Coeur D’Alene, Idaho, and checked into a Motel 6 before I called Danielle and told her I was officially in the Pacific Time Zone. “I’m sad,” she said, and I could hear little whispery cries through the phone. Earlier that day I had driven through passes that wound up and down mountains, places that were unsafe to pass; relics, I thought, of some other time.

Boeing makes a lot of planes. At 472,000,000 cubic feet, the main manufacturing plant in Everett, Washington is the single largest building

on Earth. The world’s leading aeronautics manufacturing company employs approximately 153,800 people in 48 states and 67 countries. Its total revenue for 2005 was \$54.8 billion. In the next 24 hours, 8 million emails will be exchanged among employees in the Boeing network. In the next 24 hours, 3 million passengers will board 42,300 flights on Boeing jetliners carrying them to nearly every country on earth. In the next 24 hours, the International Space Station—which Boeing is helping to build—will orbit the earth 16 times.

Despite living just 25 miles from Boeing’s headquarters, I have never been to it. I haven’t even been to the Museum of Flight. I tended to make a lot of these touristy places off-limits to myself so that when Danielle came, we could see them together and we might have just a few little things that were new to both of us. My closest connection to the company came when I was on the first of two legs out to see my Dad in Las Vegas for Thanksgiving. The man sitting next to me told me he lived in Everett and knew more than a couple of guys who worked the riveting guns at the factory. “I’ve seen them after some crazy nights,” he’d said, “and I can say for certain that they walked into work the next day hung-over...if not still a little bit drunk.”

It took me two hours on my connecting flight to Vegas to realize that the woman next to me was reading Dante. “Oh yes,” she said, when I asked her about it, “I always try to read something new and a classic.” She was older, with dirty blonde hair, tanned skin and enough wrinkles near her eyes for her smile to look genuine. She had just come from living on a boat for two weeks and seemed to have some connection to everything I asked her about. Yes, she had some friends in the publishing industry, and they had asked her to submit some stories, but they weren’t any good. She certainly admired me for what I did, though. We walked through the Las Vegas airport—perhaps the only one in existence with slot machines in it—and became separated and reconnected in the stream of moving people. When we were finally at the baggage claim she shook my hand firmly and asked me my name. Then our hands parted and I looked around for my dad.

My Dad and I had done the big things in Vegas: cruise the strip, piddle away some money at the slots, see the Hoover Dam. Then, on one of my last days there, we drove 277 miles to the Grand Canyon through a hilly desert with small, shrub-like vegetation so uniformly dispersed that you could almost believe it had been planted by a computer program. We sat in traffic at the gate for a little over an hour until we finally got in. The National Parks Service estimates that the average visit to the Grand Canyon lasts approximately 25 minutes, and Dad and I were no exception.

“I don’t want this leg acting up,” he said as we climbed the natural

staircases to get a good view of it all. From where we stood, we could see an overlook area built into a little precipice. Even though it was fenced in all around by aluminum safety railing, I had the feeling it looked dangerous, as if it might cleave itself from the surrounding rock and plummet, foreign tourists and all, into the bottom of the canyon. After trying out the panorama feature on my camera a couple of times we were ready to go back.

On the way out of the park we stopped at a little convenience store that sold overpriced Indian-themed trinkets. My dad picked up a postcard with a black and white picture of a child on it. “Maybe I should get this for your cousins,” he said. “I like to let them know there are other kinds of people out there.” He didn’t buy anything though.

Danielle was in upstate New York visiting her father. Before my travel plans had shored up with my dad, there was talk about me going out to spend Thanksgiving with her and meeting her father, the community college economics professor who I had heard was also a pretty good golfer. As a father though, it sounded like he was pretty shitty. According to Danielle, she was being pawned off on her grandparents after things got too crowded at the house. She told me, as she had before, that she really didn’t think he had ever wanted to be a dad. I hoped the conversation would end before my dad came back from the bathroom, but it didn’t. He opened the passenger-side door and sat with his arms folded across the chest.

“I’m sorry, Honey, but we’ve got to get going right now. Can I call you back later?” I said.

Danielle was already getting ready for bed, trying to squeeze in as many hours of sleep as she could before she got up at 5:30 to prep her lesson plan before another day of teaching high school.

“I guess you don’t want to talk to me either,” she said.

“Wait. Hold on.”

I put the truck in reverse and my dad’s hand shot out. It was my first time driving his brand new Tundra, and I assumed, with good reason, that he didn’t want me piloting the thing in such a shape.

“We’ll wait,” he said. “We’ll just wait. It’s fine. I can drive.”

So we switched seats and took off down Highway 64, but I still wasn’t much help. I was not a good consoler on the phone and over the past couple of months that had become increasingly clear. I wasn’t even much on conversation. We talked to each other everyday, and I was constantly at a loss to think of new things to talk about. In 24 hours, all the employees at Boeing could exchange 8 million emails, but what changed in a day for the two of us?

“I guess I’m just not good on the phone,” I had told Danielle once.

“Jay,” she said, “that’s the only thing we have left.”

Just before I left England, I planned a trip with my two friends, Jonathan

and Angela. Jonathan was a fanatic when it came to model trains and was the first person I’d met with an actual Tennessee accent. Angela was a biology student in California and was impressed by the fact that a white guy like me could operate a pair of chopsticks correctly. We’d settled on Brussels because it was the cheapest ticket we could find on Ryan Air. I organized the whole thing, booking the tickets, making the hotel reservations, quizzing myself on the layout of the city, imagining just how many turns we would need to make to get from the metro station to this place or that.

But when we got there we barely found enough to keep us interested. There was an antique car museum that Jonathan seemed to enjoy, but other than that it seemed the only thing Brussels had to offer was cold weather, street upon street of titanic banking buildings and a diminutive peeing statue dressed up like Santa Claus. Even the restaurant I had picked out—we wanted mussels from Brussels—gave me a case of food poisoning serious enough to make me weak and pallid on the foggy bus ride back to the airport. The day before, Jonathan had flown back to London to catch his flight back to The States, and Angela had departed from the train station on the trip around Europe that she had saved for two years to take. So when I heard that my flight would be delayed, there was nothing to do but hunch over in abdominal exhaustion and wait alone. Then the fog became denser, and we were all told, in as many languages as was possible, that the flight would be canceled.

The good news was that there was a flight leaving at eight o’clock that night, so there was no rush to get to the front of the line to change your ticket. But when I arrived at the counter, a ponytailed ticket operator told me in a French accent that that flight was now booked and the soonest one afterward would be at six the next morning. “Okay,” I said, “I guess that flight in the morning will be okay with my connection.”

“Oh,” she said. “You’re flying back to America tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Well then I should tell you that it’s possible there may be a strike tomorrow, in which case no flights will be leaving.”

If my stomach hadn’t been empty already, I might have been sick. My one and only debit card had been deemed invalid when I ordered a new one about a week earlier. So the only money I had was the twenty-pound note in my pocket—not nearly enough to pay for a novelty like the train ride through the Chunnel. I had also left my cell phone somewhere on the bus during my ride to the airport. I was alone, penniless and most likely, I imagined, stuck in Europe in this annoying Flemish outpost for the rest of my life.

An hour later when the ticket woman told me that there was another seat left on the eight o’clock flight, I was almost too weak to smile. I

would not be truly convinced until I was seated in the cheap vinyl seat, traveling at a good clip to the Northwest. But when that finally did happen, I experienced a sense of relief I imagine only the last evacuees of some embattled nation must feel. The airplane, yellow and blue, standing outside on the tarmac was surrounded in illuminated fog, giving off a shiny, triumphal aura, but at the same time staring back at me with the dark eyes of the cockpit windows.

Four years later, I was again making pre-Christmas travel plans. Danielle had booked her trip to Boston to spend a week with me at my mom's house. It was a rather small saltbox cape, especially cramped with my brother home as well, so I reserved two nights at a bed and breakfast in Montpelier, Vermont, my real home state. It was a pink Victorian just off Main Street, where the innkeepers served either Betsy's pancakes with the maple syrup all decent Vermonters appreciated or some of Jon's southern comfort food like rich buttermilk biscuits. "It's just like us," Danielle had said, happier than I'd heard her in months. "You're from the north and I'm from the south."

I had planned this trip out too, looking over pictures of the rooms online in order to pick the one that looked least like it belonged to a grandmother and carefully estimating the time it would take to drive from the airport up to Vermont. The only X factor was the weather. It could either be a brilliantly sunny day when snow melted in halting little drops, or a blizzard that would force us to plunk down at the nearest motel off the highway.

But as it got nearer to Christmas, it was clear that things would not be so easy. We both began to think of the New Year, the way the months ahead would be doubly trying. I had wanted to show her Seattle, to try to convince her to move here, but the city had become significantly less photogenic in the ever present densities of rain and fog. One night I arrived home and before I had time to take off my shoes and lay my stack of ungraded papers somewhere out of sight, she called. Nothing seemed new anymore. Our conversations consisted of me asking about her day at school or her mother, getting simple answers and then trying to think of something new to say. I felt like I had back in the Brussels airport, pacing the linoleum tiles trying to find some kind of meaning in the random flecks. We went back and forth on the decision to come, eventually deciding that it would be too much. Vacation time was precious and so was a plane ticket.

Instead, I flew home to Boston. The terminal in Logan was old and outdated, with mustard-colored paint on the wall and linoleum on the floor. People wore black, and shuffled their feet without a hint of a smile. It was a snowy December, and I caught a cold right away. I thought I might have gotten it on the plane. It's easy to get sick in airports. There are just

so many people. If Danielle had come, if we had stayed together, I would have had to resist the urge to kiss her. I would have pushed her away saying I didn't want her to get sick.

There's a way I forget all the troubles of airports, a way that their shiny lighted signs remain new each time I see them. A way that I forgive them for the way they've let me down and a way they set the future straight with a refreshed departure screen. A way they promise us safety. A way that we disarm ourselves when we step inside them. A way that we all find a way to trust them again.