
TERMINAL

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He didn't notice her when he reached the gate, a woman with a carry-on, roller wheels, blond hair cut to the shoulder, floral scarf. She was like a shadow, figment of his imagination, an extra in the motion picture of his life. It was Sunday morning, 7 a.m., Miami airport sluggish, as if everything had been slathered in a viscous gel. Just to move felt like a struggle, if a struggle could also feel languorous, the way it sometimes does in a dream. And yet, who was dreaming? He was not. He'd risen at five—or more accurately, given up on sleeping. He did not exactly sleep anymore. Every night, in and out of uneasy slumber, never more than when he was on the road. This morning: he had waited until what seemed a semi-civilized hour before getting up to pace, naked, through his hotel room, looking down on the deserted sidewalks, adrenaline slow as sap in his veins. He'd been east a week, a few days in New York and a few more in Florida. There was something about travel, the uneasy intimacy it forced on collective spaces, airports and hotels and restaurants. Friday, out for dinner, he had been interrupted by his boss, repeatedly, on the phone. He'd stepped outside, hunched into the exterior wall of the restaurant, back to the sidewalk, as if this might erase him from the call. It hadn't, and after the third time, he stopped apologizing. In the morning, he awakened hung over, seeing the city as if through a scrim of gauze. Outside, the streets were pocked with construction; twelve floors below, a

banner fluttered across an unfinished facade. Without glasses it appeared to read: *Library partners*. Once he'd showered, he could see the actual message: *Luxury apartments*. Library, luxury, partners, apartments—a game of opposites, polarities, a set of contradictions that could not be resolved. All around, apartment towers glistened, glass walls reflecting the tumult of a cumulonimbus sky. The streets, the sidewalks, they were empty, wet with the fallout of overnight rain.

It was weird, this viscous sensation to the morning, because emotions were charged. Nine days since Paris, and the terminal felt staticky and restless, TSA loitering in loose groups, passengers slipping through security in ones and twos. Outside the terminal, the sky had lightened to a cloudy, blue-cut gray. All of it, it made him edgy, if not the attack then its echo, that reminder of how closely oblivion shadowed daily life. Most of the time, he tried not to believe it, or maybe it was that he didn't want to know. Not to believe it? That would be like disbelieving the evidence of his senses, those images of bloodstained dance halls, desecrated eateries. No, it was the influence he most resisted, the psychology, a form of psychosis, it seemed. Terror wasn't in the bombs, not in the bullets, it was in the anxiety of influence or isolation, which made people view each other at a distance, as enemies, agents of fear. That was the threat, that it took only a single instant, a single moment of chaos, for the carefully orchestrated veneer to break into pieces, like a window shattered by a bomb. The week before, at the airport in California, he had found himself scrutinizing the other passengers, seeking a glimmer of dissonance or recognition, a hint, a harbinger, a clue. He was not afraid, he would not say he was afraid, and yet if he did not quite feel vulnerable he was aware of his capitulation, as if life had been reconfigured as conspiracy.

Well, it was almost over, he was almost home. One more flight, straight shot east to west, and then, perhaps, this jittery feeling would recede. Just fifteen minutes before, he'd had an exchange with the agent at the body

scanner, after being asked to go through for a second time. *Take everything out of your pockets*, the agent insisted, to which he replied: *I did that the first time you asked.*

The agent looked up, face tightened to a clench. *Sir*, he said, in that clipped cop voice. *You're not listening to me.*

No, he answered, his own voice rising. *You're not listening to me.*

He knew better than to argue, wasn't that the message? Don't talk back, follow instructions, don't interfere with the apparatus lest it turn on you. He didn't care, though, or perhaps he was looking for a confrontation, an excuse. War on Terror? Hah. More and more, he felt as if he were engaged in a war of his own. This was the secret, that he'd been looking forward to this trip, to putting three thousand miles between him and *everything*, except it was no longer possible in a world bound by technology and fear. Now, he was looking forward to returning, even though he understood this was one more false consolation; there would always be another set of complications, another fight.

At the gate, he found a seat, beat-up black leather, near the check-in counter, with an empty spot on either side. He slung his computer case into the one closest to the corridor. He wished he had a cup of coffee but didn't want to get up. Boarding would begin in an hour, which meant the lounge would soon be full. On mounted televisions throughout the terminal, politicians blanketed the Sunday morning shows, droning about ISIS and boots on the ground. He could hear their tone if not their language exactly, the rising timbre of their urgency. More fear, more reaction, Pavlovian, like a pack of dogs chasing a ball of raw meat, atavistic and panic-driven at once. He took out his phone, hoping he might find something to distract him. And that was when he noticed her, this woman, who had come from ... *where?* ... to fill the space in front of him, pushing her carry-on, moving in the direction of the seat he'd left unguarded, her face round and open, her mouth twisting into the shapes of words.

For a moment, he wasn't certain she was speaking to him. He looked at her vaguely, annoyed at having been disturbed. He was not eager for a conversation or a story; all he wanted was to be left alone. Here it was again, the thing about public settings: the contrivances of their intimacies, which left the boundaries blurred.

He watched as she settled herself next to him, pushing the roller bag toward the partition that separated the lounge from the gate. She was around his age—late forties, early fifties—and up close, her face revealed a set of tiny wrinkles at the edges of her eyes. *I'm sorry to bother you*, she was saying, again or for the first time, and then a smile, tentative but open, revealing the merest glimpse of small white teeth. Her accent was English but muted, as if she'd lived for some time in the States. He sat, waiting to learn what she wanted, a patina of silence that broke when she continued: *Do you have a charger I could use?*

Oh no, he thought, don't make me beholden. But still he did not speak. Instead, he glanced at her left hand (no ring, always the first detail he gathered), where she was clutching an Android, which was the wrong phone, so that was a relief. The idea of digging through his bag—and he would have felt obligated, wouldn't he, in spite of everything?... but now it wasn't his concern.

Sorry, he answered, *we have different phones.*

I left my charger in the hotel and now I'm down to 4 percent, she murmured. *I won't need it while we're flying, but I have to call my sister when we land. She's meeting me in Vancouver. I have a connecting flight.*

Do you live in Vancouver? he asked, regretting the question even as it left his mouth. He could feel the morning start to break apart, to shatter, as if a detonator switch had been thrown.

Yes, for several years. It's a lovely city. Have you been?

Once, he said, shifting slowly to face her. She wore black pants, black flats, a white blouse. *For a few days*, he went on. *When I was younger.*

Reminded me of San Francisco. What he did not say was that this had been on his honeymoon, during a period when he'd been so frightened of flying he would only visit places he could get to overland. He didn't have the same fear any longer, or maybe he had figured out how to tamp it down. Like the threat of terror: He had made a decision at some point (a decision? hardly so conscious) not to pay attention, to focus on little movements rather than the implications lurking everywhere. What was the point of worrying if there was nothing you could do? And what were the options? To stay home forever? But tragedy could also find you there. No, what he sought was a kind of numbness, not permanent but situational, a strategy to shut down his heart, his imagination, to go on automatic pilot, a strategy to move along. This, he had come to believe, was what adulthood meant, not bravery or determination but rather focused resignation, to do the things that needed to be done.

Numbness, however, meant keeping one's own counsel, and the woman was chattering again. Her words looped in delicate arabesques. He briefly wondered if she were attracted, although it didn't matter: He was married, happily, loyally, and if his eye might occasionally wander (whose didn't, really?), it was an idle gesture, a reflex. In any case, she was too open, face wide and moony, eyes flat and blank. Everything about her seemed on the surface; he preferred more mystery. He turned away again, fingering his touch screen. Please get the message, he intoned in silence, but it was too late for that, he understood.

Still, in that moment, something seemed to be decided, some direction taken or observed. *Do you know if there's a phone store in the terminal?* she asked, and as he mumbled that there must be, she straightened and began searching through her purse. *I'm going to have a look,* she said now. *Can I get you anything?* That was nice, but they didn't know each other, so he smiled and shook his head. Once she went off on her errand, he would move to another seat, a different row of the departure lounge, on the other

48 side of the gate; by the time she returned, they would be strangers once again. He was imagining this, looking forward to the silence, when she asked if he would watch her bag while she was gone.

It wasn't until she disappeared down the long corridor of the terminal that he realized what he'd done. First commandment of the TSA: *Don't accept packages from strangers*. Packages, or carry-ons. The bag sat there, beside the seat where, just a minute ago, she'd been perching. It was square and black, like all the others here. As he stared at it, he remembered a novel he'd once read in which a terrorist had smuggled plastique onto a plane by disguising it as colored bars of sculpting clay; the carrier had been her own six-year-old child.

The thought, the memory, made him buckle; he could feel dread thicken in his throat. Paris was burning, Brussels was on lockdown, but here he was, next to some stranger's suitcase he had agreed to watch out of inattention or some failure of resolve. He imagined it exploding, moment of detonation, although he knew that he would never feel it, that he would be obliterated at the speed of consciousness. Consciousness? Not even that. A flash, a spark, less than an instant, not time but rather its negation, its termination, the cessation of sensibility and sense.

He raised his eyes to the corridor, but she was nowhere to be seen. Already, she was breaking up in his memory: a scarf, a sheaf of hair, a face he couldn't recognize. In front of him, a line was forming, passengers jockeying for upgrades, trying to change their seats. Just another Sunday morning, except for the black bag next to him. For a moment, he thought about saying something, but it seemed ... he didn't know ... unbelievable. Or not unbelievable but *unreal*. Was this really how he would die? Ridiculous, he knew: No one imagined they would die at a concert or a restaurant, or waiting for a plane. Nonetheless, now that it had surfaced, the fear would not evacuate his brain. His brain, his body, it made no difference, the response was visceral, like a small animal clawing through his skull. What had he

been thinking? He hadn't been thinking, that was the point. It would be one thing if he'd made a choice, staked out a position, community over terror or some other platitude. But that was justification, after the fact. The suitcase could contain anything: clothing, money, an incendiary device that somehow escaped screening. It could mean nothing, or everything. Even now, looking at it, he was aware of it as an abstraction, a parlor game. The scene in the departure lounge was so nondescript, so uneventful, although that was just a lie people liked to tell. Nothing was uneventful, was it? Nothing was ever under our control. It was an illusion that it could be, although what made it so compelling was that most of the time nothing happened; people got through dinner, got through the performance, got where they were going without incident. But incidents happened, didn't they? They happened every day. This was how terror destabilized, not in its impact so much as in its possibility.

The bag, however ... it didn't look like much. He thought about his own, what it held: laptop, book, and newspaper, sweater in case the plane was cold. The check-in line kept growing while the seats around him filled. Passengers slept or stared into their phones. Some conversation here and there but not a lot of eye contact, more private landscapes taking shape in public, side by side. Intimacy again, or isolation, as if the world were nothing but a fever dream. Yes, a dream, or a way station in some collective shift toward the interior. *Stay out of my business and I'll stay out of yours.* This is what he should have said, or might have said, or could have said. And what was he going to say now? The woman, she might have left the airport, might be using her phone as a triggering device. He could almost imagine her, grim in her determination, measuring the appropriate distance, close enough to be in range, far enough to be protected from the blast. What would it be like to contain this brutal knowledge? But what if he contained this brutal knowledge, too? He ran over the possibilities, none of them satisfactory: to speak or not to speak, to wait or to take action,

50 and in so doing to start the mechanism by which his journey home would be derailed. He tried to imagine it, TSA again, shutting down the gate, canceling the flight. Questioning him about the suitcase, hinting at his responsibility. That was the point, wasn't it? His responsibility. Whatever else was going on, he had allowed himself to be drawn in. His fear buzzed in a low electric pulsing, as if every nerve in his body had been plucked. He thought about how she had found him, or how he'd let her; either way, he was a participant. She had seen something, some edge of disenchantment or distraction, some sign he might be the one. Maybe this was what the agent had recognized back at the scanner, maybe it was why he had sent him through a second time. That confrontation, could it be used to implicate him? He'd become an accomplice, his own tendencies turned against him: Wasn't that how terror worked?

All of a sudden, he felt his anger: rising, then falling over him, a wave. The bag sat on the floor of the terminal like a monolith. He thought about pulling it open to see what was inside. But what if she came back while he was poring through her pants, her blouses, the intimacies of her private life? What would he say then? Above the check-in counter, the digital display read 7:20; she should have been back by now. All these circles, all these options; it was enough to drive you mad. He wondered if he'd still be deliberating when the bag exploded...*if* the bag exploded. He took some solace in the fact it remained intact. Or maybe she was waiting for maximum saturation, waiting until everyone clustered at the gate to board. The phone again—and there was something about it that bothered him, he couldn't quite grasp what. He tried to remember, the Android in her hand, screen concealed as she looked at his iPhone. What had she said? *Do you have a charger?* And that was it, wasn't it? He had been relieved, but how could she not have known they were incompatible, these devices? Unless it was a ruse? Slowly, almost as if he weren't fully conscious, he let a foot stray to the carry-on, pushed it with the slightest pressure. It did

not budge. He reached across the armrest and grasped the suitcase by the handle; it was heavy as a bag of salt. On one side, a hard shape pressed against the canvas, some kind of corner or sharp edge. He didn't realize until then that he'd been counting on its lightness; the less it weighed, the less dangerous it would be. Now, he understood this as another story, a bit of fairy dust he'd sought to sprinkle on himself. Gingerly, he pushed the bag back. Not too far, he didn't want it to appear abandoned; that would lead to attention he did not want. Did not want? He almost laughed at the irony. Talk about becoming involved. He was now doing the dirty work. He angled the carry-on until it faced the partition, as if that might dull the impact of the blast.

And now, where was he? And now, what was he to do? Briefly, he thought about leaving the airport and returning to the city, but then he would be the suspect, his image captured on surveillance video. They would track him down and find him; there was no going back. Another grievance, another battle, another intercession of the public on the private, another campaign in his private war. War on Terror, war with terror, but what about *his* terror, *his* fear? He was scared, he could admit that now, scared of what was in the suitcase but also of what it implied. Whether or not it went off, it had already gone off, blown a hole in his morning, in his week. It was like the phone, the way it never stopped: a tether, a leash. Or no, something more than that—as if his insides had been emptied and exposed. On the screens, the politicians were still talking; they didn't exist if they were not seen. The same, though, wasn't true of him, he didn't want it to be true of him. He took a deep breath and then another, closed his eyes, focused on the blankness there. He was receding into a small, flat point, his whole life echoed in this instant, an instant he couldn't (didn't want to) share. Now, he thought, *now*: but nothing happened, just the terminal parade of chatter, of announcements, and the light, the shadows, popping off like small explosions in the gray behind his gaze. Luxury apartments, library partners: how could you tell what was real and what was not? He wasn't sure, he didn't know the answer, but soon, one of these seconds, this one maybe, he was going to have to decide. ◀