

## Baggage

Weird to think that of the dozens of women walking the concourse near Andy Dirkson one might be his mother. The airport is the perfect place to wonder about people—who they are, what makes them tick. Andy scans the female faces. “Not her, not her, not her...” the words reverberate through him like some sick mantra. There’s an annoying buzz in the air, muted voices amidst the distant drone of traffic. He wishes he could swipe away the cluttered sounds and confusing visuals. They only stoke his frustration. He stops at a bank of overhead monitors and tries to suss out the carousel upon which his birth mother’s luggage might be orbiting. The early evening’s the worst time to meet someone who’s arriving at an airport. What’s worse, there are a hundred flights a day that fly New York to Minneapolis. Why’d she have to pick one that arrives at rush hour?

If he waits somewhere in the middle of the claim area he won’t have to travel far to meet her. She wouldn’t give him her flight number. Said she wanted to text him after she collected her bags and got all her things together. What kind of a woman does that? What kind of a woman is she? He shrugs off the question. How in the hell is he supposed to know the answer to that? He’s always tried not to think of the woman.

No telling what makes some adoptees curious about their true parents, or what makes others want to bury their heads in the sand. Andy’s always been a head in the sand

type. Water under the bridge, right? He never dreamed someone would want to open old wounds, reach out to a child they'd thrown away like incriminating evidence. At age 21, when the representative at Life House Adoption Agency mailed him a questionnaire, asking among other things, if he would be open to meeting his birth parents if they wanted to contact him, he'd answered yes, since it was unlikely it would ever happen. He pictures the woman on the other end of the surprise phone call, brows downcast, a regretful grimace pasted on her aging lips as they form the words, "I'm sorry," in silence. He clears his expectations, even though something undeniable is floating in the heavy, over air-conditioned, nearly toxic Cinnabon atmosphere—the sweet scent of curiosity.

His adoptive parents weren't bad. They told him he was adopted early on, probably so that he wouldn't resent them. Charlie and Christine gave him everything he needed, all the comforts of home and three squares a day. But by the time he was a teenager they sort of gave up trying to communicate with him, at least in any meaningful way. Maybe it was just Andy being 15. All teens feel their parents are a big zero when it comes to emotional support. Still, it's not unheard of, parents being able to relate to their kids. He smirks. People are so fucking strange.

Andy shoots down an escalator, and walks through a turnstile that looks like it's just there for show. The claim area is a zoo. The first two offload carousels are teaming with harried travelers. He sifts his way around the people as if they are rocks protruding from a fast-moving stream. A young woman with sharp features steps into his way. She extends her hand toward him, her palm stopping just short of his chest. He jerks to a halt. She smiles.

"Excuse me, but do you know where I can get a cab?" she asks.

He stares at her business attire, smart blue suit, fake pocket square and matching neck scarf. Is this some sort of come on or could this well put together go-getter be that clueless? Andy laughs. “What? No Uber?”

Her smile fades. “I’ve got to expense it off, and it’s easier...” She shakes her head. “Jesus. Whatever.” She wheels her bag off to the side as if to go around him.

“Wait.” He dashes back in front of her. “I was just joking.”

She stops and stares up at him under a furrowed brow. “Yeah. That was really funny.”

Maybe he’s just blown recognizing an overture. He takes a deep breath. For sure—he’s definitely blown his chance to meet an attractive woman. Andy smiles a sheepish smile. “You’ve got to go up to ticketing and cross the drive up lanes. Cab stand’s on the other side of the street under the closest parking ramp.”

“Thanks,” she says, her dry tone accompanying an exaggerated eye roll. Miss I’ve-got-all-my-shit-together removes her sunglasses from the top pocket of her suit coat and props them onto her nose. “You know, you’d be kind ‘a cute if you had a personality,” she tells him, wheels around him and continues down the concourse.

He can’t think of anything to say. Why is it when someone shoots off a zinger like that you can’t think of anything to fire back until ten minutes later? God, as if he doesn’t have enough to think about, his subconscious loads on a few dozen what-ifs, just to clutter up his brain. He sighs, and then decides to walk on, dodging people, doing his best to put what was filling that woman’s suit out of his mind. When he gets to a part of the claim area that’s less hectic he finds a column to lean against and settles in for the wait.

He scans around, sizing up the maelstrom of travelers surrounding him, rates them on a scale of one to ten, ten being the most harried. A guy in a business suit running down an already moving walkway—ten, a bald guy walking by with a laptop under his arm and talking on his phone—seven, an old woman waddling with a walker toward the restroom—three, two teenage girls toting Coach knapsacks and drinking pink smoothies—one. Funny the differences by sex. Most of the men fall onto the high end of the spectrum, sevens to tens for sure, but the interesting ones are the women. They seem less frazzled, frustrated scowls on their faces, like the pressure of making a flight or passing through security has collected somewhere deep inside them and the only clue as to their real stress level is a crinkled forehead or the turned down corner of a lip (not to mention the occasional scathing put down.) Women are a curiosity, their motivations, how they think. His relationship track record is a testament to his complete befuddlement at female emotions. It's almost as if women's feelings are a giant planet that Andy has never visited.

Andy stands there in the baggage claim, the needling images microscopic organisms floating through his body's ecosystem, germs waiting for an opportunity to overwhelm their host. This part of the claim area is a musty mix of exhaust fumes and that smell a vacuum makes when it's overheating. Cars crowd around the broad glass-framed entrances as the drivers gawk and lean around, looking for whomever it is they're picking up. At least most of them know who it is they're meeting. The rest carry little signs. That's an idea. Maybe he could have written one that said, "Adult abandoned 33 years ago seeks birth mother." But that would look more like a plea for help.

An alarm sounds and swirling yellow lights fill the space with even more tension, if that's possible. A new arrival. Suitcases begin falling from a chute marked '7'. They slide down a silvery bridge and crash into a rubber ledge, then they spin round and round waiting for someone to claim them. What's the emergency here? We need to sound an alarm every time a luggage cart gets emptied out? Doesn't this happen every minute of every day? Andy rolls his eyes, slumps his shoulders and lets the exasperation roll off them.

Dozens, maybe hundreds of bags fall one by one until the conveyor is trundling all the green or red or black items around in a lazy circle. And someone owns each and every piece of luggage on the carousel, a bag they've been looking for ever since they fell out of the sky. Almost like adoption. Andy imagines a whole shit load of suitcases that no one wants twirling around in circles. No one gives a damn about them. And then maybe someone decides they want to come pick one up. And maybe they want one really bad. So, the airline lets them grab a bag without knowing a damn thing about what's inside it. Boy, that really is just like adoption. He laughs to himself so no one around him thinks he's nuts.

Andy points his toe toward the carousel, stares down at the tip of his sneaker as bag after bag drifts by. He hasn't asked for any of this. One day this phone call comes out of nowhere and a month later here he is feeling queasy, loitering around in a claim area like a kid at twilight, waiting to be called home. Is he supposed to feel good about all this? Is he supposed to feel grateful to be alive, or wish he was dead, or worse yet, wish he had never been born?

Wishing he'd never been born—that's the way he's been feeling ever since he broke up with Sheila, or more accurately, since Sheila broke it off with him. Thirty-three years old and every single relationship he's had that's lasted more than six months has followed the same pattern. Three months of getting to know someone, and then after three more months of waiting and wondering when the intimacy is going to lead to something next-level the woman gets impatient with him and finds an excuse to call it quits.

His phone buzzes. He reaches into his pocket and lights the screen. The text reads, "The end of carousel 17." That's all. No hello, no frills or heart emojis, and no picture. Perhaps that's a plus. He can form an impression when he sees her in person. Number 17 is a couple hundred yards distant. Andy tucks his phone away and starts walking down the concourse.

About 10 or so yards from carousel 17 Andy spots a woman he thinks must be her. Somewhere in her fifties, worried look on her face, a black roller-at-the-bottom suitcase at her side, red obviously dyed hair, red lipstick and dark hazel-green eyes, eyes he sees in the mirror every morning when he brushes his teeth. She locks those eyes onto his and he imagines she is thinking the same thing he's thinking—yes, we're related. He continues walking until he's a few feet away. He stops.

"You're Trudy? Trudy Farris?" he asks as he looks down. He can't bear staring into the woman's eyes any longer.

"That's right. And you're Andy?" she says, her voice shaky.

"Um. Yeah." He reaches out. "Andy Dirkson. It's nice to finally meet you."

She takes his hand, but doesn't move it up and down. She just holds his big palm in hers. "You're so tall," she tells him.

"I'm six feet nothin'. I think maybe you're just short." Andy smiles. She smiles back at him, finally releasing his hand.

"Do you mind?" she asks, as he meets her gaze again. There are big watery drops in her eyes. They're about to stream down her cheeks.

"What?"

"Can I hug you?" She reaches up to his shoulders.

Andy hesitates for a moment, but it's almost reflex. "Sure," he says, bending toward her enfolding arms. He can't tell right away if he should wrap his hands around her back or not. What comes out is some weak grasping gesture that he doesn't feel comfortable making in the middle of the baggage claim. She squeezes him. He looks around. No one cares that this woman has latched onto him. After an awkward half-minute they part again. She's full on crying now. She reaches into the handbag stowed atop her suitcase and pulls out a tissue.

"Are you all right?" he asks. A guy thing. He's sure she's just lost in the moment, but it's something to say that shows he means well.

She dabs at her tears. "I'm fine. I just can't believe it's really you. After all this time."

"Yeah." He stares at the floor. "Me either, I guess." The last part trails away in a sort of tired way and immediately he regrets his tone. "I mean, I'm glad you decided to contact me and all..."

The woman smiles. "But there's a part of you that feels lost and out of place."

“Sure. I think that’s what I’m getting at.” Andy sniffs in a big chunk of the stale air and lets it out, and then he hopes the gesture sounded like relief. Relief at her understanding.

She turns to her suitcase. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here. I’ve never liked airports, especially the baggage claim. Someone’s always losing something.”

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“So, where are we going for dinner?” she asks. Andy’s SUV roars south, away from the airport.

“There’s this place in Lakeville that’s nice, all different kinds of food, kind of a continental menu.”

Traffic’s subsided. Check-in at the hotel was painless. Trudy’s first suggestion after Andy had settled her into her room was someplace quiet where they could share a meal. Learning how to speak to one another without a ten-ton weight hanging over their heads is probably a good first step. Still, Andy finds himself struggling to keep the conversation pilot light lit.

“What kind of food did you grow up liking?” he asks.

“Oh. Well, my parents didn’t have much money. We used to think of a hamburger and fries as a special treat. Never went out to restaurants much.”

“Not even fast food?”



Trudy snorts. “Not until I was a teenager really. When I was 15, I got a job at a bakery working early mornings before school. That came with all the pastries you’d ever want.”

“Bet that was sweet.”

“Well, no. You’d be surprised how sick of baked goods you get when you know how they’re made.” She laughs. “To this day I still can’t bring myself to eat a glazed donut.” She fidgets in the passenger seat. “My whole life I’ve struggled to keep the weight off.”

Andy laughs too, more with her than about her comment. “You’re pretty thin. Don’t look like you’ve ever struggled with your...” He swallows, searching for a word that won’t detonate. “...size.”

Trudy laughs again. “You should have seen me when I was pregnant. I was a house.”

“Yeah, well, not much chance of that, was there?”

Trudy quiets. She reaches over and touches Andy’s shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... can we talk about something else?”

But now Andy’s curiosity wins. “Why? Don’t you think you should maybe tell me a little bit about who I am? Where I came from? Isn’t that why you’re here in the first place?”

“Sure. In part.” Trudy takes back her hand.

Out of the corner of his eye Andy catches a short-lived grimace on her face.

She continues. “I’d be glad to tell you all about what happened, if that’s what you want to know?”

“Sure.” But he’s wondering now if he’s ready for a bunch of sordid details.

“I was 17, and Catholic,” she says, and her head bows as she stares into her lap.

“Kind of a typical story really. The boy that got me pregnant wanted me to have an abortion, but I couldn’t do that. I mean, my parents wouldn’t have stood for it.”

Andy feels the heat gathering around his neck. He doesn’t want to be mad, but it’s his life they’re talking about. “So, you would’ve aborted me if your parents hadn’t made you go through with the pregnancy?”

“No.” Trudy stares out of the side window, wrings her hands and sighs. “I don’t know. No.”

Stillness takes over. Andy can’t think of anything to say that’ll clear the air. The questions flooding in on him are so plentiful he has trouble spitting any single one of them out.

Trudy breaks the silence. “We were stupid kids, Andy. Don’t you remember when you were 17? How curious you were about sex, and confused, and desperate to be free of your childhood, and how you thought you knew everything, when in reality you didn’t know anything at all?”

She turns back to face him. He glances over as he’s driving. “I guess.” His chest feels like a slowly deflating balloon. The tension in his head eases. “I do. I remember being irresponsible, and stupid. But, I was never in the situation you were in, so I guess I’m not in any position to judge.” He wonders whether all that came out correctly. “And of course I’m glad you made the decision you made.” He laughs, but even he can hear that it sounds forced.

“I never meant to hurt you. I just knew I wasn’t ready to raise a child. I wanted you. You should know, I wanted you. But, Andy, sometimes, when you’re that young, you get cornered into feeling that you have no choices. I felt as though I was doing what was best, or at least, my mother convinced me that I was doing what was right. God. I’m still confused about that. It haunts me every day. What would my life have been like if I would have raised you? What would things be like if we had stayed together, if I’d have had kids?”

“You mean you never had another child?”

“No. Only you. I’m divorced. Married a man who didn’t want children. Not much of a relationship really. It ended after 12 years. We didn’t get along. I so wanted to be married I guess I convinced myself that I could overlook a lot of obvious warning signs. I wouldn’t admit to myself things weren’t right between us. It’s a big problem I have, not facing the truth. Hell, I feel like I’ve been in denial my whole life. That’s one of the biggest reasons I’m here, Andy. I’m done pretending my life is anything it’s not.” She takes in a deep breath and sighs again. “I’m not making any sense.”

“No. Really. I understand, I mean, where you’re coming from.” All this honesty’s made him nervous. His chest and underarms feel warm and damp. He gets this way when girlfriends force him to talk about his feelings, like even broaching the subject is going to get him physically ill. “I’ve never been able to make any of the relationships I’ve been in work. I’m always feeling like I need to do something, or be something that someone else wants me to be. But it’s like I never get to be who I really am.” Andy shrugs. “You know what I mean?”

“I do.”

A wave of relief washes over him. Drops of sweat dot his forehead, almost as if he's had a fever for years that only now is breaking. "You think we can start over with this whole thing? Maybe get to know each other for real?"

Trudy breaks down crying. Her whole body jerks against her seat belt as she reaches to get a tissue from her handbag. Between sobs she manages, "Yes. Yes, I want that so desperately. You don't know."

Andy reaches over and places his right hand on his mother's shoulder, squeezes just a little. "I've been trying my whole life to figure a lot of this stuff out—why I do the things I do, why I can't seem to get close to anyone. You think maybe we're the same?"

"Yes. I think maybe we are." Trudy sniffs in and dabs at her eyes, trying not to muss her makeup.

For the first time today, Andy feels like smiling. He holds on a little tighter, rubs his mother's shoulder. "So, we've got time to figure more of this shit out. That's a good thing, right?"

The restaurant they're headed for appears in the distance, on a service road just off the freeway. Andy exits. By the time they reach the parking lot Trudy is crying even harder. Her hair is a jumble of wavy curls and loose strands. She pats at them trying to get them to behave. "You gonna be able to get yourself together?" he asks.

"No," she says.

"No?"

"I mean, you might not want to have dinner with me after I tell you what I came here to tell you."

“Why?” Andy steers into a parking space and shuts off the engine. The whole tone of this encounter seems to have shifted in place, like some mini-earthquake that precedes the eruption of a volcano. He turns to his mother. “What is it you came here to tell me?”

“What you said, about being who we really are to each other. Well, I...”

Andy’s heart is pounding. “What? What’s wrong?”

“We’re not going to have any time to figure more of this out.”

Andy looks around, wondering whether to be embarrassed or put out. The parking lot is dark, and even though it’s full of cars, no one’s really around. Alone, with his new mother, or maybe this is his old mother, he sits, wondering how to get off this spinning carousel of emotions. The frustration that seemed to have melted away just a few minutes ago is back with a vengeance. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I’m dying.” Trudy glances up, a desperate look in her eyes. “The truth is, I’m not some good woman who came to find you out of a sense of responsibility, or even curiosity. I have breast cancer, late stage. I already beat it once, but this time it’s back, and it’s spread all over. And I don’t have the strength to fight it again. I’ve got no one else to turn to. I have a few friends that I work with, but no family and no relatives, at least none that want anything to do with me. I’ve got nothing but a son I don’t know, who I did nothing for. So, now I’m here trying to figure out if there’s anyone in this world who gives a damn whether or not I leave it. Anyone who cares whether or not I was even here.” She hangs her head, sobbing into her tissue, her shoulders bouncing up and down with each breath.

Andy unbuckles his seatbelt and turns to Trudy, embraces her, pulls her close so that her head can rest upon his shoulder. “Well then, maybe I shouldn’t have said we have *time* to figure more of this out. Maybe I should’ve said we have a lifetime.”

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