

The Terminal Smelled of People

The terminal smelled of people; the sour smell that happens when you spend a whole day stagnant. It was not necessarily bad, but there was little that was good about it. Adam sat in a poorly padded chair with his back to a wall of windows. His flight was on its second delay, and with the snow's continual fall, it was looking less hopeful by the flake. He sat with strangers who only shared a common destination and the emotions that come when plans are dashed by uncontrollable forces. No music played from the ear buds fit into his ear canal, a stealthy way to avoid small talk, which caused nervousness and a hot face. The pages of the book in his hands were diminishing so he stretched his legs, suppressed a yawn, and began to eye gate A2 with new vigor.

The rows of seats reminded him of so many movies and so many romantic reunions. A woman, a man, a soldier, a dog, rushing out of the terminal into the open arms of their long lost- newly found- estranged lover, mother, brother, or owner. He scrolled through the possibilities.

The annoyed travelers looked anything but romantic; there were coffee stains and unbrushed teeth. Not the stuff of movies. The people of the terminal were watching though. They were entertained by sidelong looks at those around them hoping they could anticipate a head swivel so as to pretend they were not just watching you pick your nose, talk on the phone, quietly dose, or converse.

The newest segment was "A man falling into a heavy sleep" which was set in the seat directly in front of Adam. The man slowly reclined further and further in his chair, and the air was tense as he took another slip. He was being watched closely, like a climber that was holding on for dear life. Any moment he would fall into the abyss entertaining the viewers for a few short minutes.

A television hung from the ceiling to his right. It was in its third hour crackling out the latest news. Adam was sure that he had seen the latest commercial at least a dozen times; he was still uninterested in buying deodorant that would eliminate odor for more than twenty four hours. He was confused why anyone

would need more than twenty four hours of odor protection until he looked around at the gate and tried sneakily to smell his own armpits, hoping his own protection had lasted.

A young woman previously sitting next to him returned from a coffee shop clutching something frozen. The phone she was talking into was still stuck to her chin. A shudder ran down Adam's back, as he listened to her and imagined the words jutting from her mouth corrupted by ah's (GoAHd, noAH, Whahhhht). He was glad she chose a spot farther away from him, though she was attractive.

From across the walkway that separated gates, a voice came over the loud speaker. A tall blonde woman was holding a microphone that looked like it was directly off an old CB radio. In his mind she had a cowboy hat on, golden wheat in the corner of her mouth, and spoke with a southern draw: "For those of you who are traveling to O'Hare: the snow continues to fall and we regret to say your flight will be delayed further. At this point, it looks very unlikely that your flight will be leaving anytime tonight, though it has not been officially cancelled. We have started preparations to put everyone with a valid ticket into the nearest hotel. We are very sorry for the inconvenience, but at this time we are asking you to form a line so we can set up hotel accommodations. Thank you for your understanding and for choosing D'United Alaska West"

Gate A2 was up in arms. Though there was nothing that could be done to get that plane into the air that night, there were moans and groans and "why me's". People around Adam were sighing and staring wide eyed at one another; he participated. Sinking further into the chair, he gripped the arm rests to tell it he was in for the long haul. The snow was too. It picked up intensity, battling the shovels and plows for pavement dominance.

He was restless. Sitting in a chair for hours will make anyone that way. He stood up and, momentarily forgetting where he was, began a stretching routine. Adam looked around him for distractions. He knew the A terminal too well and feared venturing too far. Envisioning himself running after a plane caused his chest to tighten. After putting on his coat, he swung his backpack around and over his shoulders. It was filled with

books he was intent on reading as well as a small lap top that sat securely in the front pockets. He exhaled.

It was time for a drink.

Slowly he made his way through the aisle that led to higher numbered gates and an array of shops and eateries. A wooden sign that had "Beers of the World" crafted into its face hung above a dim lit entrance. He walked up to the bar and sat his backpack on the ground. The wooden bar light colored and reflected the lights from the ceiling enthusiastically. The high stool reached the bar sufficiently but Adam's awkward size made it difficult to find a comfortable position for his legs, just too tall. His feet dangled in the purgatory between reaching the floor and resting casually on the crossbar of the stool. A row of taps displayed the possibilities in front of him, two televisions flashed news and sports on the wall behind the taps, and a handsome woman cleaned a mug while talking to an older man that looked like he had been there for while. She sensed a new comer and glanced Adam's way. He gave a slight nod of the head and a hand raise, trying to say hello and that he was in no hurry in the same gesture. It did not convey that. She moved his direction.

"How's it going?" she said while putting the mug in its proper place.

"Not too bad." He cleared his throat, "Decided it was time for a drink. Who knows when that plane will take off?" he said quietly realizing it had been a long time since he had spoken.

"Yeah it's still pretty bad out there. All the better for me though," she said, "what are we havin'?"

"How about a vodka water?" He was surprised with his choice. In fact, he even spoke the words in a question. The language itself surprised. He was intent on beer, but his old favorite had rolled off the tongue before he knew what he was doing.

Just one.

"I can do that." She moved off to make the drink. He watched her pour vodka in a tall glass and finish it off with

some ice and water. Placing it on the bar in front of him, she told him the cost, and he paid that plus some for her. She said thanks, walked back to the older man, and continued her conversation.

He took a sip and his body felt warm welcoming the liquor. He never stopped loving the drink even after all it had cost him. But that was the past, he was flying towards the future and one drink in an airplane terminal would not hurt anybody. Five might. Five would. But one wouldn't. The snow laden airport in Minnesota was only a checkpoint on his quest. He told most people that he wouldn't have changed things; his past made him who he was today. It wasn't true. He would have changed things.

Though he tried not thinking about it, sitting in a bar surrounded by strangers, the sights, the smells, all made it nearly impossible. Staring at the television, not watching or listening, he floated away allowing himself to reflect for the first time in too long. He had changed. That was true. How much of himself had remained the same, he wondered, and had the right parts changed. Was this time going to be different or was it just calm before the storm, a swelling of the seas, the breeze before the rolling in of dark clouds?

Another sip and he was right back where it all started years ago.

The television in front of him turned to static. The noises of the room faded until all he heard was the clicking that signaled the start of an old time news reel. A man in black and white stood in front of a truck. There was a deer in the bed. The man held the rack up and smiled. It was his father. On the other side of the deer stood his grandfather. Adam could see the hat his grandfather used to wear, flaps down on his ears, bill fastened up with a button. A little boy stood between the two of them; head just barely tall enough to reach the gate of the truck. He wore a checkered coat too big for him. The sleeves hung down past his curled hands. Snow and cold swirled around them. Adam remembered but doubt arose. The young boy was him, then his brother. The memory was real, living, then a photograph. He blinked like a shutter.

The reel ticked on.

Adam saw a teenager riding his bike at night. The black and white had melted into the warm street lights that made patches of glow. The air was summer night warm and moist with humidity. The teen cut through, hunched over the pedals. He was headed home. Houses lined the street almost touching. The young man felt light. He cruised. Adam smiled and the warmth of the thought tightened his skin. He breathed and smelled the trees, the cement, the air. He longed to be back on that bike, back in the summer. The snow whispered about cold but he was remembering; the night was too warm. He squinted his eyes searching, and it was gone. The television flicked to a different channel.

"Another one?" the bartender asked still holding the remote. She was talking over her shoulder while changing the channel nonchalantly, flippant about the loaded questions. He looked down and noticed his drink was empty.

"No. No thanks." He said. Was he warm from the summer night or his airport vodka? "Better not. Water?"

"I can do that."

He lifted that glass to his lips and finished the remains. Basically water, but it held some taste. She placed the water down and continued to flip through the guide on the TV trying to find the right station. Stopping on a basketball game, she set down the remote and found someone else to help-sensing Adam was probably not worth her time. It was all the better because he wasn't and didn't want to be.

The last time he had vodka, he became aware in a parking lot surrounded by police officers and EMTs. The night started as a "one laster." One last party, one last night like it used to be, one last bender. Adam rode with his friends to the bar he used to work at. People still knew him there and it made him feel important. It started casual: a few friends, a pitcher of beer shared amongst them, slow sipping, talking. At some point it turned on him. He had hit the point where coherency and inebriation stood on a razor's edge. He fell to the wrong side. His friends left. His mind left. The memory faded to black. A flash. Then black.

He was covered in mud. Head to toe in thick mud. The police had found him after a concerned citizen had reported seeing a body in a parking lot. Adam still assumed that they thought he was dead. He probably should have been. He vaguely remembered the officer asking questions, responding, "Yes, my dad," and rattling off address and phone number. Even in his state of delirium he remembered the feeling of disappointment. Utter disappointment. In the situation. In the mud. In himself.

The policemen laughed at him. They laughed at his dad when he pulled up to get him too. He found that out later but would never forget. He wondered if his dad would pick him up tonight in the Minnesota airport so many miles away. He imagined him driving through the snow, dodging airplanes. He would have.

His memories continued playing back like movies. Scene selections from a highlight reel. There were chapters upon chapters with scene after scene. He replayed some often. The summer bike rides. The spring porch swing. He had thought and rethought them so often he sometimes wondered if they were real. Was he seeing with tainted vision? Enhancing the great, forgetting the bad? It didn't matter really. They were *his* memories.

There were deleted scenes too. The ones he tried to erase from the final edit. Somehow they remained. The girl in the car. The long ride home. He tried to taint these visions, add some rosy color. It didn't work. Adam didn't know now, but he would need those deleted scenes. He needed them now too.

He pushed himself from the bar and stood up. He put on his back pack while his legs filled with blood again. He drank the rest of his water and headed back out into the airport crowd. He saw people again. Not the crowd, but people. He walked back to the gate, back to his seat, back to the frustration of layovers. He left his ear buds out.

"Any luck," he said to the man seated down from him.

"No way in Hell," the man said, "I might as well start walking."

Adam sank into his chair, smiled, and watched the snowfall. "I am right there with you."