

Portraits from an Airport Terminal

an exercise in observation

The Vacationing Family

Here she is, leading the family as they happily disembark, blissfully unaware that their destination is the very reflection of their origin. They stare at the oddities around them, gasping at the culture shock as they find themselves surrounded by a city not their own. A teenage daughter notices that the Starbucks here has the same over-priced, under-serviced coffee that they know and love, but it is not her Starbucks. A son, on break from college, finds that the women in this city have bodies not unlike those on campus, but here they all seem so exotic and foreign. They bask in the neon glow of adventure and begin dreaming up the stories that they will tell back home. Suddenly aware that they are not alone, the matriarch of the pack frantically searches for documents and baggage. She barks at her husband (who is busy looking for a luggage cart to put down the six bags he is carrying), her voice tense with critical urgency. “Have you seen my purse? The passports, where are the passports?” But of course she finds that their belongings are exactly where they should be, and they are all thankful because it would be the end of their adventure if something unexpected had happened.

The Businessman

He sits uncomfortably in a bank of four identically uncomfortable seats. His suitcase is to his left; his hanging bag is to his right, and his laptop busy computing spreadsheets on his lap. On top of his suitcase an open binder labeled “Marketing Strategies and Business Analysis for the 2008 Fiscal Year – 5th Revision”. He is wearing the same suit and tie he was wearing yesterday, but 8 hours ago he made the decision to sacrifice professionalism for comfort by loosening his tie and taking off his jacket, which is now serving a wrinkly new role as pillow. His right hand still rests on the touchpad of his laptop, as if waiting to double-click. His chest, a mountain of over-starched white cotton/polyester, rises and falls in a slow and peaceful rhythm utterly contrary to the chaos around him. His thick glasses go unneeded as his closed eyes dart back and forth, dreaming in 20/20.

The Flight Attendant

Click. Click-clack. Click. Click-clack. High-heels against hardened linoleum. A fainter rhythm trails behind her as the frictionless wheels of her suitcase roll across seams in the floor. A delicately manicured hand holds the retractable handle of the suitcase in an impossibly effortless grasp – the result of years spent in airports. She is young, perhaps, though it is difficult to tell. Her make up is just slightly overdone, giving her face the appearance of unnatural health. A Bluetooth headset is clipped on her right ear, the blue glow from an LED only barely visible from beneath her brown-dyed hair. She is smiling as she talks – hands free – to her fiancée, about where they will be meeting for dinner. As a frantically confused man approaches her to ask for directions to his gate, she remembers that she is still wearing the uniform and her smile fades. Any other time, and this intrusion wouldn't even occur to her as an inconvenience, but right now it has stolen away her daydream, reminded her that she is still working, and has many miles to go before she arrives home again.

The Self-Discovering Backpacker

After five-and-a-half years of college, he has decided to do some traveling to really figure out what he wants to do with his degree in American Studies. Six months around Europe should do the trick, he thinks. His parents are doubtful about his plans, but anxious for him to leave home, so they have agreed to pay for his journey of self-discovery. With their credit card in hand he went to the mall for supplies for his trip. A vaguely-military-surplus-looking backpack from Old Navy. Three pairs of jeans from American Eagle. Seven pairs of frayed cargo shorts from Aéropostale (he doesn't really know what the weather in Europe is like, but in his mind he generally looks better in ragged shorts, so he stocked up.) He knows he's ready – backpack stuffed with clothes, blog recently updated, iPod playing Fatboy Slim in his ears – but now he's alone in an airport for the first time, and he has no idea where he is going. His ticket says Madrid, but it's starting to sink in that he has no idea what to do when he gets there.

The Terminal

It is a sprawling maze of concrete and glass. There are more people traveling through these hallways everyday than there are in a professional sports stadium. There are restaurants, gift shops, news stands and hotdog vendors. There is a chapel, a hospital, a police station and a post office. There are even little electric taxis taking people from one gate to another. From a distance it might look like a stepped-on anthill, with confusion and chaos resulting in order. Out any given window, there is a scene of a hundred identical tailfins parked at a hundred identical gates with a numbering system so incomprehensible that it's unlikely any man remains who remembers how it got started – efficiency at the cost of logic. But there can be no doubt that it is an awe-inspiring achievement of human ingenuity. Like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon or Colossus of Rhodes, it will be forever remembered by all who collectively share in its experience.

The Honeymooners

They stand close together in the long line to board their airplane. They are closer, in fact, than any two people in the entire airport. They stand in line, not saying a word. They have been talking to friends, accepting best wishes from family and introducing themselves to each other's strangers for two long days, and now they are enjoying silence. They stand in line, completely expressionless. The muscles in their faces are sore from smiling for pictures and their retinas still see spots from camera flashes, but here in the airport, among thousands of complete strangers, they are alone for the first time as husband and wife. Nobody knows who they are or where they are going. Nobody wants to congratulate them or give them advice. For the first time, they are alone together, holding hands, enjoying the weight of foreign-feeling rings on their fingers.

The Tourist

He has been in the airport for five hours, not because he had a long layover, but because he is deathly afraid of missing his flight. He reaches to his back pocket to make sure his wallet is still there, and is concerned for a moment when he feels nothing. Then he remembers that all his personal belongings – his wallet along with his ticket, passport, maps, pen, camera, extra film, eyeglasses, and sudoku book – are all in various pockets of his khaki vest. He imagines that he looks like a great hunter on safari in the African wilderness, but in reality he just looks like a man with overstuffed pockets. He has been waiting at this gate for three-and-a-half hours. He has seen airplanes come and go. He has watched as passengers came running down the jetway at the last minute just in time to catch their flight. And now he has just been told that his flight will be departing out of a different gate. His eyes grow wide with worry as he frantically searches for signs directing him to where he needs to be. In his panic he misses a turn and finds himself surrounded by gates whose numbers and letters are nowhere near his own. He needs professional help. He spots a woman in a uniform – he notices that it is not the same uniform as gate agents, but he is in a hurry and doesn't have time to make distinctions so any uniform will do. She points him in the right direction and he sprints (sort of awkwardly jogs, really) to the new gate and even though he is out of breath, he desperately asks the gate agent if he is too late. She looks at him for a few moments. Then she types for a few more. Then she tells him that the airplane isn't here yet and they'll be boarding in about 35 minutes.

The Ramp Agent

After 14 years of various jobs, this is the best he has ever had. He is outside, and even though it's unbearably hot during the day, he doesn't mind because he works night shifts. It would be a stretch to say that the air on the ramp is fresh, but at least it's better than the recycled, oxygen-poor air inside the airport. He is friends with most of his coworkers, and they yell inside jokes to each other over the roar of jet engines as they pass the time until this airplane is ready to leave. His job is to direct the plane as it backs away from the gate, to make sure it clears the fuel trucks and baggage carts. If he fails, there could be irreparable damage to the aircraft, the fuel could ignite, there could be an explosion! He doesn't really know this, but he imagines that it might happen. He's really the one in control here; the pilots just push buttons in the cockpit, he's on the front lines. All he has is a bright orange vest and knee pads to protect him, and a pair of flashlights to get the job done. He is a soldier. Well, he will be a soldier. Right now he's using the flashlights to make two white circles dance and chase each other on the tarmac while amused passengers look on. Inside, in the sterile, florescent corridors of the airport, people are on vacation. But here at work, he's happier than almost all of them.