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"Layover Story"
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This is the story of a layover. Who tells that story? I'm telling it to you now. One January evening, my flight got delayed out of Louisiana, where I'd been talking to people about their past lives, and I missed my connection in Houston. I had a night there. Trying to have a travel experience near the Houston airport is like trying to write a poem from the words on a yeast packet. Don't try to make it beautiful. Just let it rise. Let the freeways run like unspooled thread into the night. Blink against the neon signs of chain stores. Take shelter where you can.

I take shelter at the salmon-pink hotel where I am sent. On our shuttle from the airport, I hear the voice of a difficult woman coming from the front row. She can't believe the bus will run only on the hour the next morning. She can't believe her dinner voucher is for so little money. She needs someone to take her bag into the lobby. She'll also need someone to fetch it tomorrow. Later, at the hotel restaurant, her voice is there again at the table behind me: She wants her bag placed where she can see it. She wants her water without ice. She doesn't want to be a pain but she really needs to know if the veggie wrap is absolutely 100 percent vegetarian. She wants to know about the other stranded people sitting around us, especially Martin the German and the Penn State math major. The math major loves Pi Day. The woman with the voice wants to know whether she bakes pie for Pi Day? No, she just eats pie for Pi Day. What kind of pie does she like? All kinds. What kind of math does she like? All kinds. Well, okay. She especially likes patterns and sequences. The woman with the voice wants to know how she feels about *i* to the *i*? The undergrad doesn't know about *i* to the *i*. "Oh, girlfriend," says the woman with the voice. "Go look up *i* to the *i*."

When she finally turns to me, the woman with the voice asks what I do for a living. She loves that I'm a writer. Turns out she's coming from a vacation in Mexico. Turns out she's on my flight back to Newark. She suggests we protest the hourly shuttles together. The 4:00 a.m. departure is too early for our flight, but the 5:00 a.m. is too late. We should campaign for a 4:40, or a 4:45. She is a difficult woman from New York trying to convince me that we should be difficult women from New York together. But I'm not a difficult woman from New York. I'm not any kind of person from New York. I just happen to live there. I just want to take the 4:00 a.m. shuttle and stop talking about it. It embarrasses me to be associated with her request, with her sense of entitlement, with these justifications—*I hurt more, I need more*—perhaps because I recognize myself in them.

It's only when the woman and I walk to the front desk to check on the shuttle that I notice how she walks. The woman with the voice is also a woman with a body. She's limping. Once I notice her limp, I feel guilty about leaving her to make the shuttle request alone—as if it would be an act of abandonment, in her hour of need, to refuse her my company. She tells the clerk she needs help with her bags, and in the morning she will need help again. She explains that she was in a wheelchair at the airport. I bet she has one of those nebulous pain conditions where the pain is always moving somewhere else. I bet she felt like a victim before she ever started hurting. I am actually thinking these things, and I am someone who has written indignantly about the world's tendency to minimize the pain of women in precisely these ways, for precisely these reasons.

We don't get our 4:40 shuttle. She's going to speak to a manager, she tells me. She'll call me when she gets this sorted out. She takes my number. We trade our names.

Back in my room, I google the name she's given me. It's fairly unusual. The first ten hits are all the same porn star; the next hit is an article about an attack in New York a year earlier. A homeless man lunged at several strangers. The face of the woman with the voice is one of the faces. I enlarge her on my screen. I try to remember her limp, which part of her was hurting.

When I see her in the morning, I won't tell her what I know. The etiquette of our era demands that we pretend we are still unknown to each other, though she will know I probably googled her, and I will know she probably googled me. But I find myself reframing everything I've seen her do—every complaint, every demand, every annoying attempt at small talk—as if a victim couldn't also be a solipsist. Now I want to read everything about her more generously, in order to compensate her for the indignity of becoming a character in my story, *the woman with the voice*, when she was already another kind of character, in another story entirely.

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The next morning, I try to help the woman with the voice as best I can. I carry her bags through the Houston airport. I offer to stay with her while she waits for her wheelchair. I barely grimace when she speaks rudely to the airport staff. She's been *stabbed*. She asks me to pre-board the plane with her and get her bag stowed above her seat. She asks if I'd help her get from Newark to the city, once we arrive—if I can get her through the airport train station in New Jersey, through New Jersey Transit, then through Penn Station, in New York—all those stairs and escalators and platforms and doorways and crowds and crowded baggage racks. I say yes, yes, yes. Yes to all of it! She has a story and now I'm part of it. I'm swollen with virtue. I'm so swollen with virtue I can hardly believe it when the man sitting next to me on the flight wants to have a conversation. Doesn't he understand? My virtue has already found its object; I have none left for small talk with strangers. The woman with the voice is sitting in the front of the plane, probably making someone wish they were sitting in the back.

The man next to me starts talking about driving his sister out to Texas, where she was moving for work. She's a traveling nurse and they drove through an ice storm in Atlanta and I really couldn't care less. This guy is just a kid, complaining about the Houston airport not having enough vending machines. I feel like his mother, as if I should offer him a snack. On the tiny monitors above us a nature documentary plays: a baby bison is getting cornered by a pack of wolves. What will happen next? Only one thing, we all know. Back home in Brooklyn, no one is waiting for me. I'm newly single and not-so-newly thirty and leaving lots of crumbs between my couch cushions from dinners made of crackers that don't seem like the dinners of an adult.

Now this guy is talking about his tour in Iraq. He says he got used to desert skies. *Oh*. His life is a little different than I'd thought. I don't know how to ask him about the war. But I ask him anyway. I ask him about the guys he was there with—that seems safe, possible. He shakes his head: the best crew of guys ever. "Now here I am," he says, nudging his duffel bag. "Flying home with an army bag full of hermit-crab shells." I ask how many are in there. Maybe fifty, he says. He has a daughter and she has four pet hermit crabs. I ask if they have names. "They've got so many names I can't keep track," he says. "Their names are always changing." Right now there is one named Clippers and the others are Peaches. All three of them? Yep. Just Peaches and Peaches and Peaches. He says they need a bottomless buffet of shells. They keep getting bigger, so they keep needing new ones.

So the shells in his bag aren't hermit-crab shells because they were made *by* hermit crabs, but because hermit crabs might someday use them? Yes, he says. That is correct.

Perhaps there is profundity in this. We claim something not by making it but by making it useful. What we squat inside can begin to constitute us. And now he's saying something else, something about the new aquarium he's building for Clippers and the Peaches. He's using old shower doors from his construction company. He has over twenty large sheets of glass, he says, and more than fifty smaller ones. And I'm trying to run the meaning-making logic over this one too: *we have the big and the small; we have more than we can use*. But it doesn't yield; Houston all over again. And how big will his crab aquarium be, anyway? An entire city block? This guy can't decide whether to be interesting or not—like someone who is mostly late but every once in a while, unaccountably, on time. Why would I possibly believe he owed me interest, anyway? Other lives are shells I want to scavenge only when the mood strikes right, only when the shells are good enough.

For now, I want to know what these crabs eat. He says they'll eat pellets, but they prefer fresh fruit. What kind of fruit? Pineapples, he says. They love pineapples. He explains that they have a lot of preferences. For example, they need salt water *and* freshwater.

What about when they live in the ocean? I ask. How do they get freshwater then?

He doesn't know. He says, "That's what I'm still trying to figure out."

This man punctures me. I felt like his mother until he said he was a father. I think of all the fear he's known—the guilt, and loss, and boredom—and how I don't know any of it. His endlessness is something I receive in finite anecdotes: big desert skies, a little girl poking crabs. Sometimes I feel I owe a stranger nothing, and then I feel I owe him everything; because he fought and I didn't, because I dismissed him or misunderstood him, because I forgot, for a moment, that his life—like everyone else's—holds more than I could ever possibly see.

It makes me think of that David Foster Wallace commencement speech, "This Is Water," the one that everyone finds inspiring except the people who think it's unbearably trite and find it pathetic that everyone else is so inspired by it. I'm so inspired by it. Wallace talks about the tedium of standing at a supermarket checkout counter, irritated by the other people in line, "how stupid and cow-like and dead-eyed and non-human they seem." But, he says, you can choose to see them differently. You can regard the woman who just yelled at her kid and admit that for

all you know she might have just stayed up three nights straight with a husband dying of bone cancer. Maybe she just helped your spouse get through some tangle at the DMV. Maybe the annoying woman on the bus just got stabbed by a deranged stranger on her morning jog.

If you learn to pay attention, he says, "it will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars."

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The Newark airport train station in the middle of a blizzard does not feel on fire with the same force that lit the stars. I am helping the woman with the voice and the injured body get onto a train headed into the city. We get hot chocolate at the tiny station café, and wait on the outdoor platform, in the Jersey cold, while the snow comes down. I'm tired of benevolence, ready for my own apartment. She tells me it was stupid, how she got hurt. It was her own fault.

I'm a little bit confused. Is this a confession of privilege guilt? Guilt at her complicity in the systems that oppressed the homeless man who stabbed her? Is she going to tell me that he had a story, too? Because he did: untreated mental illness, a life spent moving from shelter to shelter. He got sentenced to more than twenty years in prison, where most likely his mental illness remains untreated still. One of his victims was a child. This is the kind of story with an easy victim and an easy villain; except maybe it's not so easy—maybe we are all the villains, maybe that's what the woman with the voice is trying to tell me. She is also telling me she is tired of standing, though I cannot make her a chair.

Anyway, she says, she was dancing down in Mexico, and her knee started hurting, but she kept dancing anyway. It was "Mamma Mia." How could she not keep dancing? That's how she hurt herself. She looks at me and I nod. How indeed.

But inside I'm feeling robbed, like something has been stolen from me: the story in which I carried the bags of a woman still recovering from a stabbing attack. Now I'm in a story about a woman who danced too hard on the Mexican Riviera. It's a story about putting bags in overhead compartments and waiting in the bitter Jersey cold, about getting to the ugliest train station in the world and weaving through its maze of underground tunnels with three suitcases to emerge into the grim bustle of a purgatory between Midtown and Koreatown.

In a way I can't explain, I've started to feel attached to this woman, weirdly protective. It's as if we've been on some kind of odyssey together, and it has less to do with the night in Houston or the blizzard in Jersey and more to do with all her shape-shifting in my internal narrative. First she was a tyrant, then a saint, and finally just a tourist, dancing.

We part ways by the cabstand. The woman with the voice thanks me for my kindness. She'll take a taxi home. I'll take the subway to an empty apartment in Brooklyn, where I'll read another article about the attack, full of eyewitness quotes. I will never hear what her voice sounded like when she was crying out, in broad daylight, for help; when she was just a difficult New York woman asking her city to save her.

This is how we light the stars, again and again: by showing up with our ordinary, difficult bodies when other ordinary, difficult bodies might need us. Which is the point—the again-and-again of it. You never get to live the wisdom just once, rise to the occasion of otherness just once. You have to keep living this willingness to look at other lives with grace, even when your own feels like shit and you would do anything to crawl inside a different one; when you would claw one Peaches out of the way, and then another, and then a third, just for a shot at some shell of respite. A 3:30 wake-up call in Houston isn't the respite shell. New Jersey public transit the day after a New Jersey Super Bowl isn't the respite shell. The blizzard is no respite shell for anyone; it makes the hurt knee throb harder.

Does graciousness mean you want to help—or that you don't and do it anyway? The definition of grace is that it's not deserved. It does not require a good night's sleep to give it, or a flawless record to receive it. It demands no particular backstory.

You thought the story kept changing, but the most important part never did. She was always just a woman in pain, sitting right in front of you. Sometimes it hurts just to stand. Sometimes a person needs help because she needs it, not because her story is compelling or noble or strange enough to earn it, and sometimes you just do what you can. It doesn't make you any better or any worse. It doesn't change you at all, except for the split second that you imagine the day when you will be the one who has to ask.