

If There is an Airport

by Heather Fowler

If there is an airport, it is one of dreams. If there is a dream, it is one of shadows. If there are shadows, there is not much more but the thoughts of a short man meeting a short woman on a runway of forbidden desires, in a foreign city belonging to neither, where there is no time to sate the urges of years spent talking yet never meeting.

Does this man bring with him, after a five-hour drive, a board game they may play in this airport where her plane arrives? Does he himself arrive? These things are mysteries. If he drives and arrives, with this gesture, does he do so to show her she does, after all, mean more to him than an idle fantasy he uses (or has used) only when necessary to stimulate years of unfulfilled loins--or does he simply not come, not drive, not arrive—mainly not doing a damn thing except sit in his house with his wife he cannot make love to, abandoning his literary mistress in the sacred name of cowardice or possibly virtue?

Are cowardice and virtue interchangeable at times?

If he does not arrive and she lands only to disembark to his non-arrival, non-romance, non-justification, does this mean, then, that she was right in the perceived unbalance and can view him as a taker who does not ever give back and is cancerous to her soul? If she is beautiful enough, is there no way he cannot arrive? If she truly moves his heart, will this force his hand onto his keys? If he does not come, will she want to take a razor-blade to the finest, whites part of her neck?

If she does not want to cut herself, will she crave to disappear nonetheless?

If there is an airport, it is one of dreams. It is one of shadows and possible culminations. It is one of strangers (who are actually online lovers) possibly meeting, and it is the answer to a number of irritating questions, like: Is any of it real, this talking we do?

Or, if (dolloed up, beautiful, waiting), she finds he does not come and adds all up to the idea that he has truly never gone out of his way to entertain or pursue her, should she, as she thinks, simply let him go? Can she hate him enough? Is she too beautiful for such self-destructive behavior--too talented and loving to not be so well-loved?

And, in the end, does she? Let him go, that is? Of course. She is married, too.

This story, this airport, was always a tragedy. His wife will continue to sit on his couch in his home where his dog barks and his cat meows and his children fight. There will be no double break-ups and no new wedding at the end. Leave that to Shakespeare who knew how to make a dark thing light. Still: The man loves her, he says, so what if a dark thing is light but patchy, like stars in a black blanket of sky?

What if it sparkles and dims—or is like white horses, bright figures sparkling on the greenest hills, in front of the bluest skies, (but riding free) on the spirit's darkest days?

The sound of the plane is a whir. Still, she almost knows too well he will not come, for he never has. Inaction is his action. No, he will not come for her or with her. For he never has.

Most days his hands engineer his own comings (and goings). But on this day, are those keys to his single-family dwelling and his single family car in his hands and possession for a ride towards a need, wearing her name?

Is there a need? Perhaps she is only a want, like another slice of pie after dinner. Like a massage given by a whore, like a twenty percent tip.... But the plane will land soon. "Please buckle your seatbelts," the pilot announces as she fixes her trashed make-up. More tears happen. More and more, added to the sum of those that came before. The engines or her thoughts buzz. Yet, there is hope.

Since she hasn't arrived; there is still possibility, plausibility... He knows she is coming. What if he is standing there, waiting for her?

But if there is an airport, it is one of dreams. If there is a dream, it is one of a woman crying for any number of reasons but mainly because the lobby is full of people that don't include him, if she suspects correctly. Can she picture her own unraveling? Yes. Or, maybe she will stop crying and smile as the well finally runs dry, for she will have cried every single tear she can imagine already over the proceeding months. Or, perhaps, if he is not there, she will simply fall into that carpet like mist to linger below the other travelers' feet.

Maybe, she will re-center, stand tall, walk proudly out and phoenix above the thoughts that are sweet poison in order to reclaim her inner warrior. For, she will remember, when he doesn't show, that she doesn't need him. She never did. She is better off without him. And she will recall that she has always made this self-reclamation, in the end, no matter how dumb her acts—or how she may feel like a crushed petal left to the undersides of other people's shoes.

The plane drops its landing gear. If there is an airport, it is one of dreams. (She checks her seatbelt twice.) If there are dreams, there will be an awakening. (She applies mauve lipstick.) If there is such an awakening, she will feel the earth again, having been so sick of air below stances that she could write a manual about how to avoid such frippery modalities as building thought castles on such shifty mediums as sky. She puts her hand to her heart like she pledges her allegiance, but to what does she owe allegiance? My country tis of thee, sweet land of... Does she long for this awakening or harbor fear? Both.

Both.

Either way, in this airport, which is made of dreams, or which is real, on the runway, your seat cushion can be used as a flotation device. Will it swell and protect you, wherever you are? And, in this place where two people who purport to be enmeshed in an impossible love don't normally interface, in the inner sanctums, will there be an opportunity for something great, or something unbearably laced with despair? Will the beautiful woman

disembark soon and find something she never knew? But will it be him?

She stands. She follows lagging passengers down the aisle. In moments, she will have entered the space she wonders about. Does she hope this will be a dreamlike place where the air will wear a person like a coat, where the very tables can speak, and where her fantasy of this man, dreamt a thousand times on the plane (the one where he arrives with a game with wood tiles under his arm and a smile on his face), be enacted? Will there be a moment where their hands will palm the air after stirring coffees with no cream or sugar, stirring just to stir and then palming each other's hands after so many words, endless words, love letters, poetry, stories, and long absences? Two palms, connecting.

And even if they cannot have each other after this day, not then, not ever, is this act that he might arrive, that he might let her touch him and look at him, enough that she could bear the rest of her life without him, asking him to change nothing of his home, but possibly then, figuring out a way where their friendship could be built, if not on undeniable love, then on something else (or the very same thing it had always been based on: dreams) such that it might begin differently and anew?

And if they sat across from each other then, what would happen when this happened, this fragile palming of air and then the other's palm, an act they had so oft discussed? Would it be electric? Would they sigh? Would they die right there and solve all problems by having two, sudden yet freeing heart attacks? Or would they simply recognize the care they feel and felt, which is and was real, then complete the game of words and tiles for the day—the woman having won with her placement of seven tiles spelling the simple word "refrain"—and then, in two opposite directions, walk?

And would the word "refrain" mean to her the part of a song that most moves a soul, or "Please, do not enter into that labyrinth that is my heart again"? Would each, in such an airport, during such an exit, after such a culmination, move away fondly, never to be seen together (again) or in the same place twice, but writing to each

other as friends, always and again, long time friends who write their pain in stories and poems and sometimes to each other, checking on the weather where the other lives, on the idea of dreams and airports with no solutions due to earlier marriages and circumstances, and check in, every once and a long while, on the dangerous inquiry topic they cannot, all the time, avoid—which is the relative status of the happiness of the other's life, which was never one of dreams but of real-world hard edges, quiet beauty, frequent boredom mirroring contentment, and the firmest, most wakeful ground ever to exist?

If this is an airport, it is one of dreams. Seven years of them, ferried back and forth in email and letters, heated exchanges that could, quite possibly, have a zero sum as she steps off the plane.

She steps off the plane. Disembarks. The woman is beautiful. She looks up and around and down. If there is an airport, she cannot see it. She sees only people, for this is how fully she seeks him in that waiting room; walls do not exist, only flesh. Her scope of that room is dreamlike. And yet, he is not there.

If there is an airport, it is one of dreams, dying. Amazing how quiet the sound of one heart breaking can be, she thinks, quiet as the wet that begins to slide down her face, carrying several shades of (eye) shadow to her collar in heated streams as she strides to claim her bags.

So does the world whisper crisply then like fall leaves rustling on trees and then falling all around her feet as she steps outside to rent a car in the outer lot to drive off onto a road she has never traveled before? The road to a different future less benign? Certainly.

This story was always a tragedy. You knew that. You knew that. I swear.

