

## To America and Back

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I made two mistakes. First, I took 15 minutes to have a crab roll and a beer with my cousin who had waited an hour for me in Boston's Logan International Airport. The second—and more devastating—mistake was handing my passport to the security clearance employee at the walk-through metal detector. The first mistake affected when I got in line to clear security; the second one blasted my faith and belief in America's "acceptance" of people from around the world. What befell me is happening as you read this and it demands an honest discussion in the public realm. At the very least, we all need to be aware of what is occurring in the world around us.

## Welcome to the Under Sieged of America

A friend asked me to visit her in Idaho during my spring break. Not exactly Florida or Jamaica, but a change from Nova Scotia nonetheless. I decided to go. My flight path went from Halifax through Boston and Chicago, finally arriving in Spokane, Washington, on February 13, 2002. I contacted people I knew in Boston who I hadn't seen in awhile to meet at the airport during my two-hour layover, and a distant cousin said he might be there. A friend set me up with his family in Spokane to spend the night if the weather was bad when I got in. The trip looked good, if a bit impulsive.

Snow was threatening to fall in Halifax when I arrived at the airport. Being just after noon on a Wednesday, the place was quiet. I went to the counter that had a taped piece of paper with BOSTON written in bold black letters. The agent directed me to a table nearby where my one bag to be checked would be handsearched while she checked me through to the Pacific Time zone. Two AirCanada employees very methodically and smoothly unpacked my duffel, unzipped my bathroom kit and pulled out the insoles of my sneakers. Satisfied that the green bag was not a problem, they smiled and said "Have a nice flight." The agent handed me boarding passes for my three flights and I hurried to security.

Halifax International Airport security is not strict or large: two metal detectors, X-ray machines and about 10 officers. My backpack and camera bag accompanied my jacket through the machine while I walked through the detector. Neither my belt nor the eyelets on my hiking boots set the red light flashing so, relieved, I waited for the rays to finish zapping my carry-ons. An officer asked if she could look through my bags. We chatted as she pulled out my two cameras and CD player. I offered her a piece of Trident gum as she rifled through the gloves, notebooks and glasses. With the all-clear and peppermint breath, I made my way to the gate.

AirCanada uses prop planes for the two-hour Boston run. The scenery below is the spectacular coastline of Eastern Canada and northern New England, but the droning of the engines leaves the inner ear in misery. Eleven passengers, one attendant and two pilots took flight 8861, scheduled to depart at 1:50 and arrive at 3:00 (Halifax is one hour ahead of Boston). The door closed and we pushed away from the terminal with the

propellers flashing in the swirling snowflakes. We lined up for taxiing to the runway. And a seemingly trivial moment set a constellation of events tumbling that ultimately drove me to compose this essay.

We sat on the tarmac for 15 minutes.

Fifteen minutes is not long. That's one quarter in NFL games. It's how long it takes to broil a pork chop or boil pasta. Most of us can run more than a mile in that time. So, even though I was with strangers in a metal tube with engines, those minutes passed as only a minor disturbance.

Once we were airborne, the flight was uneventful. Slivers of clouds slid beneath the plane as the monotonous white of Nova Scotia's snow morphed into a shimmering winterized Atlantic. About 30 minutes before we would have arrived, the pilot announced that the U.S. military was using some airspace and we'd have to go 200 miles around it, adding at least half an hour to our flight time. Still no worries from me, as it sounded like only half of my layover it would be gone. Then, a short while later, the flight attendant needed to confer with the pilots. She stood in the cockpit doorway with her back to us passengers for about five minutes. We could see blinking instruments on the ceiling and bright clouds through the windshield. The heads of the pilot and co-pilot were in plain view. Many of us exchanged surprised looks. The unspeakable potential was clear and present.

We landed, finally, at least 45 minutes late. I cleared U.S. Customs without a blink. I exited into Logan and stopped to get my bearings to the next terminal. As I stood perplexed by construction signs and conflicting arrows, I felt the stare of a man. I locked eyes with this stranger just as he said, "It IS you!" My cousin had been waiting for an hour for me.

We tramped to the United Terminal and found the security checkpoint that would lead to my gate. An airport restaurant was nearby. We hadn't seen each other in almost one year, so we ducked in for a small bite and a beer. He couldn't stay longer than 10 minutes because of an appointment but I ordered a crab roll and a Sam Adams. We machine-gunned questions and answers, making the most of the time that AirCanada and United were allowing us. Finally, with 20 minutes before I was to depart, he left the airport and I turned left to head into security.

Anyone who has recently flown in the United States knows that the National Guard is posted as the first line at security checkpoints. A fatigue-clad soldier looked at my passport and boarding pass, peered at me through lowered eyes and waved me through to the line-up. Three men were ahead of me, unloading laptops and discarding jackets into the X-ray machine. I slipped my carry-ons and jacket down the rollers. A private security company employee stood on the other side of the metal detector. She extended her hand for my documents and told me to walk through. Again, no flashing red lights or piercing bleeps. Then she opened my passport.

An audible yelp escaped her lips. I turned, as did the few people in our immediate area. She had been causally leaning against the X-ray machine but now stood erect and tense. Even the puffball of her light brown hair seemed charged for action. Behind her glasses, I saw her blue eyes darting around the checkpoint.

The photo she saw obviously shattered her sense of safety. I got my passport in October 1995, only weeks before President Clinton shut down the government during his congressional budget battle. I was in my second year of college, enjoying a life behind a redwood forest and Northern California fog. When my picture was taken, my hair was curling to my shoulders and a beard sheathed the lower half of my face. The strength of my Lebanese roots was more than evident—brown eyes and hair, olive skin and, shall we say, prominent nose. I laughed when the flash went off. I often used the passport as a tool for humor as well as proof of my Americanness. I never considered that those carefree days of college would incriminate me seven years later.

The employee tossed my passport and boarding pass at, not into, my hands and sneered at me to go into secondary inspection. I caught the flying blue book and card, incredulously stared at her and said, “Okay, um, what about my bags?” She crescendoed with, “You need to GO OVER THERE, NOW!” at which point a different National Guardsman turned to see what the outburst was about. Many eyes were on me now, none too pleasant. Suddenly feeling in hostile territory, I stumbled back a few steps and steered into a roped zone behind the checkpoint.

A stout olive-skinned man with a heavier accent than my immigrant grandmother took control of my fate. With expectedly firm directives, he had me take off my flannel shirt, shoes, belt and hat and spread my arms and legs. The pat-down began, followed by the infamous beeping black wand sweep. He paraded my boots through the X-ray machine after which he started to pat me again. This whole time, my bags were waiting on the exit rollers. I asked the man about them. He smiled and said, “Oh, you don’t need to worry about those...” omnipotently saying, ‘you’ve got bigger things to be concerned with.’ I noticed the second pat-down was more involved, with my pockets turned out and the waistline of my jeans rolled over. He was also more aggressive. What was this supposed to accomplish? Rattle me so I would crack and reveal a terrorist plot? When he smacked the inside of my right knee, I dropped my arms and stepped back, silently but blatantly telling him that this search was over and I would not be tossed around like a criminal any longer. He looked amused by my pathetic resistance to this out-of-control process. Using his overbearing paternalistic smile, he said I could go. Close to 15 minutes had vanished. I jumped into my boots, scooped up my dissembled bags and clothing, and ran to the gate with shoelaces levitating around my feet.

When I got there, I saw a severe absence of everything—no waiting passengers, no airline employees at the counter, no flight information on the red digital display. Perhaps the gate had been changed, I thought. I swung around to the gate behind me and went to the counter. “Where is the 4:45 to Chicago?” I asked the man. “Are you George?” he replied. “Oh, they were paging you. The flight is gone.”

## Games of the XXI Century

The next 20 minutes were spent with the United ground crew searching for my checked bag and the man at the gate rebooking me across America. I was now on Delta Airlines, heading to Salt Lake City and then Spokane, arriving only an hour later than planned. My patience, severely drained during the security debacle, slowly returned as the man explained what I needed to do. I asked him if I'd have to go through security again and if so, if he could assist somehow. Of course I did. Of course he couldn't. I explained the reason why I missed my original flight and reiterated my request for help. "Well sir, we show that your plane got in only 45 minutes late so that should have been enough time to make your connection," he replied. My blood surged through me and I slammed my hand on the counter. "Well I thought so, too," I yelled. "Only some of us aren't the right type to get through security fast!" He, unfortunately, bore the first breaking wave of my anger. I stormed away, past the security checkpoint and to baggage claim.

The baggage handlers finally found my bag and I snatched it up, for the moment relieved that my physical goods were in my possession. I jetted to the Delta desk to recheck the bag. The steorage class line filled the roped section and meandered into oblivion. Without hesitation, I decided I was now a first-class cabin passenger and stepped in line behind six people. A couple of minutes later, Delta agents began pulling Salt Lake City passengers out of the megaline because of the rapidly approaching departure time. So again determined to maximize my time for the security lineup, which was at this moment more than 150 people long, I barged to an open agent and blurted out the situation. The woman was trained in verbal judo and used a low, even voice to get me breathing again. "Okay, now don't yell," she started after confirming what United had set up. "We need to search your bag because we are issuing you a ticket right now." I repeated my earlier failed request for assistance to which she agreed. And off we went for the second bag search of the day.

The agent escorted my troublesome luggage and its owner, a perceived national security risk, to a dark hollow en route to the checkpoint. A uniformed officer now dissembled the Halifax International repacking job. I looked to the ceiling and saw cool blue tiles surrounded by white tiles and '6 FT', '3 FT' written in black tiles. "It used to be a Speedo store," echoed the officer's slow, deep voice. She was an expert multi-tasker, keeping one eye on me and both hands in my bag. She cleared it and informed me which checkpoint line was the fastest. I thanked her and swung into the crew line just as she had advised me.

The Delta checkpoint was solid. Two cameras were trained on each of the three lines. Military-strength doors were poised to slam closed in an emergency. I assume the glass was bulletproof and shatterproof. The lockdown potential was commanding and crushing. And somehow, in spite of all that had happened, it was comforting to me.

The lines moved reptantly. The secret about my faster line was out and it quickly assumed the length of the others. As I was waiting, I dug out my California driver's license with a photo from 1999. The four years that had transpired between the photos

witnessed a shave or two and a buzz cut. The picture reflected, at most, the physical wearing down of youthful rebellion. My passport retreated to my backpack, not to be seen. Finally, it was my turn. I repeated the process from earlier: loaded my goods into the machine, handed my information to the security employee (same company as United) and walked through the metal detector, hoping that events would be different this time.

They weren't. No beeping or lights, but a distrustful employee decided that I was not safe. He held me at the detector and called "Male check." Two Delta flight attendants came through with sodas from McDonalds. He had them take a drink each before letting them pass. He called for a male check again. The line behind me stagnated. He called a third time. The conveyor belt for the X-ray machine stopped. He called a fourth time and finally got results. In retrospect, I guess I'm happy that he didn't scream and throw government-issued property at me.

A tall black man began the strip-and-pat-down process. This time, the only clothes remaining on me were a Hanes T-shirt, Anchor Blue jeans and Champion socks. Everything else was lumped into a plastic bin and re-radiated. During the wand sweep, he asked me to turn around and when I did, I was face-to-face with arriving passengers heading to baggage claim. The secondary inspection area squeezed the river of exiting travelers down to 10 feet across. As I stood with outstretched arms, people looked me in the eye and quickly looked away. I wasn't the only one suffering their conviction—a similarly undressed dark-skinned man was to my right, an elderly Indian woman was battling with her sari across from us, with a black man in a business suit next to her. The jury rolling by didn't seem vengeful but punishing. I felt my face turn red and growing drops of sweat conglomerating on my neck and forehead. I cast my lot with one man, almost asking for some kind of acceptance from an unknown person. He dissected me as he passed. I didn't notice the employee tell me that I could go.

I had more than 10 minutes before the boarding would start so I tied my boots and headed to the gate. I called my friend's parents to have them pass the new arrival time on to my friend. Her stepmother is a U.S. Customs officer on the Canadian border, so she spared me from telling the details when I said, "It sucks being Middle Eastern in this world sometimes." She apologized for the country and wished me luck. When boarding began, I was prowling the front of the line, hoping that I could find some peace on the plane. Out came the driver's license and boarding pass, this time for inspection by the airline. After September 11, Delta instituted "random" security checks at their gates. By now, you should be expecting this: I was called aside for my fourth security clearance in four hours.

Nothing new occurred this time except my refusal to cooperate. The woman, from the same security company, couldn't get me to turn around, to open my pockets or give her clear permission to search my bags. Flustered, she passed me on to her co-worker who was met with similar stonewalling. Eventually, they were somehow satisfied, although bells in their heads may have been ringing. I was among the last people to board the plane, even though I started near the head of the line.

In a continuing replay of the day's twists and turns, we sat on the tarmac for 30 minutes and then fought speed-sapping headwinds all the way to Utah. When we landed at 9:55, I held out desperate hopes that I could make my 10:05 departure or that Delta would hold the flight. I bolted to the counter at my arrival gate and asked if the Spokane flight was still open for boarding. I realized that I'd have to clear another security checkpoint in the next concourse and felt a sinking ball inside tell me that I was stuck in Salt Lake. A moment later, the gate agent confirmed this feeling. Delta was putting me in the Radisson Hotel for the night and flying me to Spokane the next morning.

The only upside of the day was that I was able to contact a friend who lives in the city. She picked me up from the hotel and we drove around looking at the Olympic venues at 1 a.m. I was in the most protected and watched city on the planet, ironic for this pre-determined threat.

### A Discussion Not Happening in a Neighborhood Near You

I've been searched before, when metal detectors thought they'd found something. I'm no stranger to the inconsistencies and nuisances of air travel. And I completely understand and agree with the need for increased security. But something is under attack. That something is why America is America—the strength of the nation is in its diversity and that diversity is the American culture. And underlying both is acceptance.

Call it a facade, an illusion, a falsity. It's the dream that is this nation and that dream pulled three of my four grandparents across the Atlantic and through Ellis Island. It's the dream that these people could follow the sun west over the Hudson River to California and Arizona and grow roots in their new communities. It gave rise to a new generation that entered the military, the educational system, the medical industry, the art scene. They opened pharmacies, gift stores, hair salons and liquor outlets. And that generation produced human rights lawyers, healthcare professionals, scientists and journalists. America has thrived on its layered tapestry but ignorance and fear are clawing and splintering this weave.

The nation is cannibalizing itself when people that are different in physical appearances and religious beliefs are targeted as criminals. What does different mean anymore? We only need to look at the Unabomber, Timothy McVeigh, Jesse James and the Confederacy to see that devastating threats come in all shapes, sizes and colors. Pinpointing one group of people only encourages those in the 'majority' category to prowl and plan under cover of "Oh, he isn't Middle Eastern looking, he must not be a threat." That encouragement is feeding their strength and tapping ours.

You won't hear these issues raised because we are at war and it's unpatriotic to blaspheme America. I ask though, how can people like me be patriotic when we are in the spotlight for threatening the very country we are lucky enough to belong to? I've now lived in two other anglophone nations and been challenged on the American ideals of freedom, acceptance and opportunity only to have my share of these drawn and quartered. I thought of bleaching my hair so I wouldn't look so Middle Eastern and

instantly, I remembered Anne Frank. She wrote about dyeing her hair, except it came out red instead of blonde. I realized that she tried to hide and survive but was found and her fate was no different than the millions that stood up to public hatred. My ancestors did not risk their lives, leave their surroundings and native land so their offspring would cower and jump from shadow to shadow to avoid their fellow citizens. I will not disgrace them with that.

My return trip went unassaulted and as I flew out from Boston, I stared across the Massachusetts night. Rivers of car lights flowed around the city, keeping the engine of the state at full throttle. I've been sad to leave the States almost every time because of the constant challenge living in a different nation. This time, though, I felt nothing. That's not accurate. I felt countryless. I don't belong to Canada and America doesn't seem to like my kind. So where do I go? At 27,000 feet, I felt safe and secure because my feet were among the clouds. And clouds don't discriminate.