

Nights at the airport

By Alice Mills

There are rules at the airport. You must not settle down for the night too early. The last plane leaves just after midnight so you must circle, hesitate, go for another circuit with your creaking trolley. It would never do to be seen as a regular. The choice of seats is important. I have seen the meekest, most inoffensive of sleepers prodded with the gun and made to walk out into the wet dark: his mistake was to choose an isolated chair, away from the neon and the soldier prodded him out like dirt from a fingernail. The trick is always to lie in the light.

The trick is to find a woman. The soldier never touches a woman with his gun, never pokes her awake and orders her outside. But if you are a man, you have to sit next to the woman, preferably with her head lolling against yours, so that they will leave you alone. It's not enough to be on the same row of seats. A child would work even better, but it is not possible. A woman is impossible.

The rule is to look like a traveller with a suitcase and a trolley. Every so often, of course, you have to leave the airport to collect your dole and wash your clothes, otherwise the police will sniff you out. The suitcase, the trolley, the look of a reluctant sleeper, the airport does not mind these at all, in fact it takes pleasure in making sleep difficult, the noise, the lights, the patrol. That is why I have my own special chairs to sleep on, the row of three with the third one raised and cushioned with a label reserving it for the elderly and infirm and pregnant. A sleeper can lie on those three seats with feet on suitcase on trolley and head on the high chair. My seats. My sleep.

Great was my rage when I saw the woman take my three seats for a second night. I do lose my seats from time to time as I idle along, pretend to search for a boarding pass, visit the toilets, survey the shuttered cafes. In fact it does me good not to sleep on the three seats every night, not a regular at all, and sleeping on the other hard seats, I savour my own place more.

So that first night I watched her experiment how best to position her trolley and herself around the passport and handbag. The soldier with the long gun came by and looked at me, crouched under my scarf, but never at her, the woman lying on my seats. I could have been asleep if only I had the cushioned seat under my head, my feet comfortably on the suitcase on the trolley. She woke up and turned over awkwardly. I could have told her that she was in no danger of having her passport stolen. Honour among sleepers.

All the next day I thought about erasing her with my own suitcase, my little blanket, my trolley. Great was my rage when I saw her claim my seats for a second night. She was there long before sleeper time, and I had missed my chance as I circled the airport as always, up the lifts, look at the board, check the watch, down the lifts. She must be a professional. There was no way to move her on. Man against woman, regular against freshface, she would probably claim that she was elderly and unwell and pregnant, and the soldier's gun was at her disposal.

Great was my rage as I sat on the hard plastic seat looking at her. Twice she went to the toilets and I could have claimed my place once she had creaked her trolley down the corridor, my place, my soft cushioned seat for my head, the other seats just the right height for my legs to stretch out on suitcase on trolley, but I was afraid of the soldier and the cleaners and the cold dark asphalt. There was no help for it.

Today I walk with a purpose. It is my clothes washing day, but never mind that. Something delightful I am planning for tonight's contest. A true professional, I am looking for trouble but I do not see her anywhere in the airport as I collect my ammunition. A plastic bag I already have, knotted around my dirty clothes. Now I risk letting them simmer uncontained. I spot a discarded icecream. Someone nods approvingly as if I were a public benefactor. Macdonalds is always good for a half-eaten burger and today I risk it three times, loading my plate with ketchup and mustard until the girl behind the counter sends the cleaner in my direction. The other cafes cost more, less crammed with eaters, too difficult to pick the plates.

The plastic bag is getting nicely heavy, even so. I would like to fill it with spikes and itching powder but there is not even a pin to be found, a dropped ballpoint is no good

to anyone, bring back the fountain pen. When I was little, there were always pins on the floor. Not any more. The bag sits nicely on top of the suitcase on my trolley. I hold off going to the toilet as long as I can in case the bag smells the place out. People wrinkle their noses as they pass, change direction. I sit on a dark chair waiting.

I keep an eye on the three seats, waiting for her to arrive and settle, trundle off, come back, sleep. A nice surprise it will be, lying against her, under her, bursting, leaking. They will have to throw her into the outer darkness, however elderly and infirm and pregnant she is. I wait for her to claim my seats. I wait. I reek. I wait.