

Boarding Pass

Dubai or Singapore? Fluorescent lights, crowded duty free shops, travelers clumped in twos and threes and extended families along the walls. Multilingual announcements for flights to Europe, Asia, Middle East. Carl looked around, locked on to the flowing ivory robes of fellow passengers, and jerked to ground at 3 a.m. on a Thursday in July, United Arab Emirates. Yes.

This was the fourth airport in a week. London to Cairo, on to Amman, then a two-day trek to the Jordanian village unearthed during an impossible flood. Three days on site, now Dubai on his way to...

Exhaustion won out and he dropped off to sleep again, carry-on looped firmly around his curled ankle. His wrist twitched as he dozed, swatting imaginary blowflies and fanning feigned heat in the climate controlled transport hub. Carl's other hand clutched a battered canvas hat, still frosted with mud. Four a.m., five, then five-fifteen.

The shrieking laugh of a toddler learning to walk jarred him again, and Carl stretched lanky arms above his head with a grumble and a yawn. His next flight out was only at eleven, so he uncoiled to his feet and headed to the airport showers. The hot water swam over him, washing grime and jetlag as it swilled down the drain. Rifling through his traveler's checks, Carl thought better of succumbing to a restless five hours sleep in a room at the airport hotel and dressed in a casual change of clothes. He crumpled the hat, closed his duffel, and stepped back into the flow and the din.

Emerging refreshed, he looked around for the bookshop, exchanged a handful of miscellaneous coins for a three day old Washington Post, and sat down for a cup of coffee sludge and toast. He was halfway through page two, mind writhing with war stories and landslide after mudslide after flood, when his travels back ended him and he was again lost to thought.

This last site visit had been disappointing. After others' discoveries of the last decade in Iran and Syria, Carl had been positive of extending his reach with this latest find. Having spent the better part of the last eight years living in London and regularly commuting to the Middle East, he'd been sure of a breakthrough on this trip. Even the improbable rain worked in their favor, leaching soil away from foundations and exposing possibility. Instead, nothing. Likely that the area was not a settlement at all, just a temporary set-up on the way to somewhere else. He'd paid off the workers, cleared accounts with customs officials, and caught the first plane out.

So much for that next book. At this point he'd be lucky if he could dredge up so much as a donkey cart of interest for this latest dead end. And his contract with the publisher was riding on calculated success. Maybe he'd just crank out another textbook. Carl returned to a comforting ritual, reciting his bio in his head. Dr. Carl Richardson, Ph.D. Archeologist, author, Anglophile. Born and raised in Philadelphia, UPenn graduate, moved to London as a base for extensive site work in Iran, Jordan, and Syria. Post-doctoral Albright Scholar, youngest ever Editor-in-Chief of the American Journal of Archaeology. Lately, even this rosary failed to calm or impress.

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Back to the paper, where at least the misery and the destruction were predictable. The full-frontal assault on his career prospects had occupied most of his attention for the week since leaving London, but on return passage Carl found himself confronted with personal battles as well. Robyn had left him, and this time he did not expect her back. He could barely remember the last time they fought, and then two weeks earlier he'd come home to find her sitting quietly at her desk, writing. He glided past her without leaning in for a kiss and hung his jacket in the hall closet.

'Hello, how was your day?' Not that he listened for the answer, because her days were always the same. A pediatrician at Royal North Children's Hospital, Robyn loved her job but had long since given up trying to explain her joy to him. So he started when she looked up from her correspondence, gave him a glass rim smile and stood up.

'Fine. And actually, although you didn't ask, this letter is for you. I've been composing it all afternoon, and it's just as well you're here now because I couldn't bear to waste another sheet of paper on the obvious. There is no 'us' Carl. There hasn't been an us for years. We've carried each other to respectable places in our careers, we have separate friends, you're traveling more than ever, and I'd like us please to drop this farce.'

Carl looked inside himself for a fight, and couldn't find even the cast-off chaff of will to reconcile. He glanced at Robyn then, in tweed and pearls and sensible shoes. He swiveled his head around their library, alphabetized shelves of her first editions and his lopsided, annotated tomes of civilizations that had rolled into the dust. Thudding into his dusky leather recliner, he released them from assumed domestic bond.

'I'll move out when I come back, Robyn. It may take me a few weeks to find a new place, but I can crash at Tom and Clarissa's until then.'

Robyn's sharp, square face threatened to look stricken; then she relaxed, dropped her glasses on the coffee table and sat across from him on the paisley green couch that she'd brought along as part of 'her stuff' when they'd moved in together six years earlier. 'We can sort out the details later. I just thought it was time to clear the air, don't you think? Better, much better. Also, while I am in open book mode, I should probably tell you that I've been seeing someone.'

Again Carl attempted to look suitably shocked. Failing even to his own internal critic, he shrugged. Robyn took that as an invitation and went on, as if introducing her invisible lover, who now occupied a tangible place between them. 'You remember Clive, head of pediatric neurology? At the conference last year in Budapest. On and off since then. He's got two children, four and seven. Lovely girls, really.'

Robyn ran out of small talk, and Carl obligingly filled in. 'Yes, that's nice. Seems like a good guy. I hope you're happy.' The platitudes came easy. Carl thought then that it might be the earthquake of the unexpected, and that his gliding through was a webbed front that would wash away.

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Sitting by himself in the airport café, Carl replayed the scene in his head. As if searching for precious artifacts, he sifted through the whens and whys of his relationship with Robyn. All he came up with were shards of initial mutual respect, a warm friendship, and the convenience of not living alone. Not sufficient, he supposed, for it to last. And barely enough fragments for him to reconstruct the sorrow that he might have anticipated, upon the unceremonial, unsentimental disintegration of his life in London. Because Robyn was wrong on one score—even before he'd packed his suitcase for this trip, their friends had taken sides. Mostly her friends to begin with, their loyalties hadn't shifted much as they'd come to know him over after-dinner drinks and movies and brunch. So although Carl did not mourn Robyn's leaving, he craved the comfort that her built-in life had brought him after six lonely months in London when he'd first arrived. Already, still thousands of miles away, that's what he missed most.

Peter Connelly was on a mission. The retired anthropologist, traveling with his wife and a study group from an extension class that he taught out of Cornell, was in search of unsweetened orange juice with a splash of vodka. He'd loaded up on the stuff on the plane, until the aircrew cut him off and Glennys stopped speaking to him in hushed tones. Actually she stopped speaking to him altogether, turning her attention instead to one of their trip mates, a withered former high school teacher named Jeremy who spent most of the year in Pensacola.

After that, the plane ride was peaceful enough. Peter swished his drink around in the shallow plastic cup and conjured visions of tombs and long-dead villages rising from the desert. He dug his notes out of overstuffed hand luggage and wondered whether he just might finish writing that historical novel after all. Him leading this trip had been Glennys' brainchild—all he wanted was to wander the ruins and scribble the imagined lives of former inhabitants into narratives of glory and sacrifice. Easy to do, in the grandeur of crumbled foundations and shrapnel of a ghost town thousands of years old.

The study tour had gone pretty well. Peter compared the sedate pace of his current charges to the hectic runaround of fieldwork with graduate students when he was still teaching, then refocused his attention to the pressing task ahead. A six hour layover in Dubai meant time for a drink or three. Now to that vodka and OJ.

The airport bar was too harshly lit to be comforting, but Peter settled himself in a chair in the corner. Checking twice about the no-sugar added juice factor, he ordered a double and turned to a fresh page in his legal pad. Mechanical pencil in hand, he began.

Carl studied his boarding pass for the sixteenth time that hour and feigned fascination with the duty free shelves. He'd been pacing listlessly for an eternity, and wondered if it was too early for a drink. The tepid leftovers of his London life reannounced themselves in slow procession through his head, and Carl headed to the bar.

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Whisky sour in one hand, a bowl of spicy peas in the other, Carl flopped into the only empty armchair across from an unkempt old man who muttered to himself and tapped his heels impatiently. As Carl stretched his legs to get comfortable, his foot caught the crossbeam of the low table, tipped the surface and sent refreshments sprawling across the floor.

‘Goddamnit, watch what you’re doing!’ Carl’s table mate stumbled to his feet and brushed frantically at his notebook with a dripping napkin. Succeeding only in leaving bits of cheap cocktail paper on the blurred pages, Peter glared at the idiot who’d interrupted his narrative flow. The expected apology streaked back at him, a swarm of ‘I’m sorrys’ and ‘Let me get you another drink.’

Peter was mollified, but still damp. ‘It’s fine look, it was an accident. Thanks though, you don’t mind if I say yes to that fresh drink.’

Bar attendant in tow, Carl mopped up the remnants of their early morning kick start and replaced Peter’s beverage of choice. ‘Uh, the bar’s a bit full now, do you mind if I...’

‘Look, I said don’t worry about it. Sit down—do you mind if I try some of those? What are they, garbanzo beans? Fried? And is that chili? My wife’d kill me if she saw me eating this stuff! Reflux, y’know? Lucky for me then she’s off maxing out the credit card on souvenirs for the grandkids, eh?’ Through a mouthful, Peter continued, ‘Say, where are you from? I’m trying to place that accent, but it’s a bit difficult from brief abject apologies and your mumbling.’

Carl thought twice about being offended by the old geezer’s rabbiting on and his presumption. He decided on the civil course. ‘Yes, well, I live in London now, but I’m from the East Coast. Philly. You?’

That raised Peter’s smile. ‘A fellow Philly native! Born and raised in Manayunk, I hardly recognize the place now. It’s all, what do they call it, retro clothing stores and unpronounceable coffee shops. Gimme a straight coffee, cream and two sugars, and a Danish any day. Although this ain’t bad for breakfast either,’ he said, raising his glass and gulping it to midline.

The conversation paused for Carl’s turn. Reluctantly, he took the reins. ‘I lived in Fairmount growing up. Left after grad school though, and London’s a long way from Pennsylvania.’ Carl resisted the temptation to glance meaningfully at his watch. He thought of making his excuses, but his plane didn’t leave for another four hours. Plenty of time for a few more numbing drinks, even if he did have to tolerate this chatter.

Carl leaned back, distracted listener. Peter bulldozed on. ‘I retired last year from Cornell. Anthropology mostly, although paleobotany is my first love—and I never could say no to a dig site in my day! Then Glennys, that’s my wife, guess she got a bit sick of me around the house... anyway Glennys dreamed up this grand scheme of us leading a blue-rinse study tour of the Middle East. The college organizes the whole thing—guides, hotels, all your comforts

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for the old bones. I'm just the nominal expert on the ancient stuff. We've been away six weeks, and I could stay here forever. Jordan, Syria, Israel, Iran—it's been more than a decade since I really got my hands in the dirt, y'know? Hey, I didn't catch your name. I'm Peter, Peter Connelly.'

On automatic pilot, anticipating war stories and trumped up adventures, Carl's eyes snapdragoned at the mention of Peter's profession, grinned in spite of himself, and reached out his hand in belated greeting. 'Pleased to meet you Peter. I'm Carl Richardson, with the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Guess we have more in common than hometown and a penchant for early drinks. So, where exactly have you been for the last month and a half?'

Peter clenched his empty tumbler in both hands and leaned forward, elbows on knees. 'Well, I'll be damned! The Petrie Museum of Egyptology at University College is on my list for our next trip to Europe—I was always too busy teaching and writing to spend any time there, but it must be incredible!'

The two men hunched across the low table, abruptly united by common interest and language. Words like 'grid,' 'coprolite,' and 'dating' haloed in the air between them, eclipsed by loud laughter at an insider joke. Their synched heads nodding, the discussion turned to permits, politics, and bribing the border guards to access sites in the region.

Two and half drinks later, Carl and Peter had known each other forever. Through their bragging pirate tales, the bonediggers played theater of the absurd—near misses, fantastic finds, the Holy Grail. Shifting closer to domestic drama and life choices, their stories drifted through the terminal and into the desert dawn, a spicy mix of sanctuary, stranger trust and jetlag.

Twirling the dregs of his final drink, Peter squinted and cocked his head at the younger version of himself. 'Now Carl, I gotta ask. Glennys is always telling me to mind my own beeswax, but I gotta know—for you, was London moving toward something, or running away?'

Carl allowed himself the luxury fabricating a glib fiction. But he'd been drinking, and the truth tumbled out. 'There was a woman—Jessica. We dated all through college and grad school, but we decided—I dumped her. I had a stellar career to build, and she wanted a puppy and a picket fence. She lives in New York now, teaches Comparative Literature at NYU, lives on the Lower East Side.'

Carl rose halfway out of his chair. Peter's hand on his arm stopped him. 'You know an awful lot about her for someone you dropped midstream more than six years ago, Carl. And now, returning to London? Running away or...?'

The loudspeaker cut him off. 'Flight EK201 to New York is now boarding, Gate 76. All passengers please proceed immediately through security and to the gate.'

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Carl counted a thousand heartbeats between the dying echo of the announcement and his future. He ran a callused hand through his hair, shifted his weight to accommodate a duffel full of dirty laundry, and stood. 'Guess that's my plane after all, Peter. Gotta go. And thanks. I can hear the desert call.'

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