

A Terminal Day

By

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Jake was really tired. He had been sitting in this chair for nearly three hours. It was actually a pretty comfortable chair, but any chair can become a burr after three hours of sitting in it. Jake didn't particularly care for Los Angeles, either. He usually came here once a year on business and that was enough. This time his trip was personal. A childhood friend was ill and told that he only had months left to live, so Jake came to say his final good bye. Another friend, who worked for the airline, had arranged a flight so Jake could save some money, but this was beginning to be a hassle. He never realized stand by tickets were so precarious. Poor weather resulted in misconnects on other flights that ended up over booking Jake's route to his current destination. Jake is from Chicago but he was on his way to Dallas to stay with a friend.

Jake's wife and children were in Chicago. They had a big fight, the final fight as far as Jake was concerned. He packed a bag and left to see his friend but he told his wife he wouldn't be back. There were tears, regrets and pleas but Jake was determined to get out, he had enough. Of course, he was concerned about the children but they would work that out later, he wouldn't fight over them with his wife. Life just hadn't turned out the way he thought it would. This was his chance to start over and finally get out of life what he wanted.

For two of the last three hours Jake had noticed a woman looking at him. He just figured she must be attracted to him. Well, right now he wasn't interested. A very familiar feeling of fullness overcame Jake, so he got up to use the bathroom. The terminal was an interesting construction. It reminded Jake of the atrium from his high school, so full of light and warmth. He happened to know the terminal was designed by a colleague. The beams that support the cavernous ceiling seemed to be fingers reaching down to grab the first passenger who comes into their reach. Why were the bathrooms spaced so far apart? This long walk made it imperative that Jake walk past the food court. He had already consumed enough fast food to last a year, so he certainly didn't want to eat anything else. The aromas of food were becoming overwhelming, so he quickened his pace. He must have caught the attention of security, because a uniformed man approached him and asked "Hey, pal, are you okay, why are you in such a hurry? And may I ask where you left your bags?"

"Oh, I am just going to the bathroom and my bag is at gate eleven", replied Jake.

"You shouldn't leave your bag like that, it may come up missing", said the security guy, "why don't we go and locate it and you can make sure you don't lose track of it?"

Jake was a bit perplexed by the assertive behavior of this man but the feeling of fullness was beginning to become urgent, "No I think it'll be alright I just want to use the bathroom and then I'll return to my bag."

The security guy looked perturbed, but he suddenly relaxed and smiled at Jake. "You know what, I'm sorry. This isn't an unusual situation at all. It's just that we've been

on alert all day and with the recent bombings in other countries we are on edge a bit. I just realized I saw you in that terminal since early morning. By the way, my name is Gus. With all the cancellations I'll probably be seeing you around here today because you're a stand by, right?"

"Unfortunately, I am and all is forgiven, Gus", replied Jake, "but can you direct me to the nearest restroom?"

"Absolutely, it's a bit further down this corridor on your right side. For some reason they didn't put many bathrooms in this wing when they designed it."

"Thanks Gus, replied Jake with a less anxious tone, "by the way I'm Jake. I appreciate your vigilance, it makes me feel safer."

Gus smiled, "My pleasure, see you around, Jake."

Jake hurried down the rest of the terminal to the bathroom.

Jake returned to his seat after talking with a flight attendant, steaming that the next available flight for him was four hours away and he wasn't guaranteed a seat on the flight. He immediately noticed that the same woman who was looking at him earlier from across the gate was now sitting right across from him, looking right into his eyes and smiling.

"Hello, can I help you?" he asked with a bit of suspicion.

"No, hi I'm Samantha", she replied, "I've been thinking I knew you from seeing you earlier. I heard you mention Shuster and Shuster architecture when you were on the phone and I finally realized who you were. You're Jake, right?" Samantha bit her

lower lip as if she was still a bit unsure. “I was on my way to say hi when you went down into the terminal and I figured I would keep an eye on your bag.”

Jake realized who she was, “Wait a minute, Samantha, the intern? That was like seven years ago. Oh wow, you’re a grown woman now. How have you been? What are you doing, now?”

Samantha replied, “Well, I am a stay at home mom right now. I finished law school after working at Shuster and worked at the firm that represented Shuster.”

Jake was impressed, “Yeah, you were really talented, I’m not surprised at all, but you gave up your career to raise kids, huh?”

Jake’s comment didn’t get any reaction from Samantha. She was used to people being condescending about staying at home to raise children. “Oh yeah, despite all the time I spent in school, being a mom is the most important job I’ll ever do. I can always go back to being a lawyer later on if I want but I can’t go back to being a mom.”

Jake didn’t buy the sunny words Samantha had about giving up her career, so he pressed her a little bit, “But you having to give up your career would seem to be something that might cause friction in your relationship.”

Samantha acknowledged the difficulty, “My husband and I have had some rough times. We spent a lot of time figuring things out but we realized it was just the pressures of parenting and trying to balance the family thing and work.” Samantha become more contemplative, “At a certain point after leaving work I was frustrated with not being able

to be creative outside of parenting, but I developed a new hobby that allows me to really feel productive. I've also started to do some pro bono consulting out of the house."

Jake started to think about his own children at that point and what they would feel after they realized he was gone. He suddenly felt it odd that he hadn't considered their feelings much up to this point. He also never considered that maybe his wife was feeling the pressures of being a mom and not having some sort of creative outlet. Jake continued to talk with Samantha about the trial and tribulations of her marriage and how she and her husband worked through them. He found many parallels in his own relationship. After a while Samantha boarded her plane and left, they hugged and she left Jake with a ton of reflections that he was determined to sift through. He was still on his way to Dallas to stay with his buddy, but he was now prepared to consider what his actions had wrought on his family.

After checking the probability of getting on the flight out of LA Jake saw Gus walking past the gate. "Hey, Gus, you still patrolling the corridors with the eyes of a hawk?"

Gus turned abruptly to see who had spoken to him, "Oh hey Jake, no I'm off shift and I am getting ready to go home to my brood. That's what I like about this place, people are going and coming but they're all on the way home at some point. Airports are a place where people are going hundreds of different places, but no destination is more prevalent than home. What about you Jake, are you headed out or back home?"

"I'm headed out, but LA isn't home for me", Jake replied.

"Where's home?" asked Gus.

“I’m not sure yet Gus. I live in Chicago but right now I’m headed to Dallas.”

Gus raised an eyebrow, “So you and the missus having some problems, huh?”

Jake was caught off guard “What makes you say that, I didn’t even say I was married. Did you do some kind of background check on me or something or are you just psychic?”

Gus smiled and gave a little laugh “Jake, I’m sixty three years old, I’ve been married forty one years and I have four grown children. I have also been working in this airport for thirty seven years. I can almost sniff the air and detect human relation dilemmas.”

Laughing, Jake asked “Well if you’re so efficient at determining human relations issues, what’s your record on fixing them?”

Gus looked right at Jake with a more serious look, “I have a perfect record, because I stay out of other people’s problems, Jake. My grand kids are waiting for me, Jake so I gotta go. But I’ll tell you this much. As men sometimes we get so caught up in the roles that history and tradition has established for us that we lose sight of a lot of important things. Those things can be so small that we might have missed them anyway, but success in relationships depends on recognizing them and giving them their due attention. People get married for all kinds of reasons, Jake but the most common one is that they develop a connection that they think is special. Somehow this person became the most important person in your life. But life is the problem isn’t it, Jake. Children are born, we get fired, hired, we move, people die, new revelations surface that teach us different things about ourselves. All these things can cause

disturbance in that special connection. Gus turned to wave at a colleague, "It's like the wireless connection that I saw you using earlier this morning. There's a special code that you have that allows you to connect with your own personal server. But the further you get away from the signal the weaker it gets until there is no connection. But as humans we seek out some way to communicate so that we can be connected to something. We'll patch into the nearest WIFI hotspot, and for some reason it may seem faster and even better. But you can always repair that original connection, Jake. It's best to fix it, especially if you have other users, by that I mean kids. But you can't do it here or in Dallas, Jake. I don't know what happened in your relationship but if you don't give it every thing you have it may not be today, or even tomorrow but one day and for the rest of your life you'll regret not giving it your all, Jake. And if you've got kids they'll be the ones who bear the brunt of your decision. You have to go home to fix it. Then again, if your wife is just crazy then you better keep running. In that case enjoy your flight to Dallas." Gus responds to some chatter on the two way radio that was strapped to his broad shoulder, "Jake, I gotta go, whatever happens you'll be alright."

Jake replied with genuine emotion, "Thanks, Gus you're a good man. We just met and we've talked for just a few minutes, but something tells me I'll remember you the rest of my life."

Gus felt the impact of that statement from Jake. He could only reply "Goodluck, Jake", and he disappeared into the terminal crowd.

Jake walked back into gate eleven and sat down. He peered out into the sea of planes that were arriving and departing the gates. He wondered if he would ever get on

one of them and where would it be headed. He reflected back over the conversations he had over the last couple of hours and how they had impacted him. Just over twenty four hours ago he was so sure of where he was headed. Now, he wasn't so sure. In Dallas he had an opportunity to start over and reach for the life that he dreamed about since he was very young. Didn't he deserve that chance? There were hundreds of people walking and sitting in the terminal with Jake, yet he suddenly felt so alone. The bright and warm terminal became a cold and lonely prison. Would this become his new home? Always going and coming in search of something that was just an adolescent dream. Was he doing the right thing for himself? Certainly, it wasn't the right thing for his family. He needed some coffee to help him think clearly. He walked down to the Starbucks and got a latte.

On his way back to the terminal Jake noticed a lady who was reading a plaque on the wall of the terminal near the customer service booth. It was a plaque dedicated to the architect who designed the terminal almost fifty years ago. Jake asked the man at the customer service desk about the architect, "Why do they still have this plaque when this terminal has been renovated into its current configuration based on the design work of David Wu?"

The customer service guy smiled and replied in a Southern accent "Hello sir, my name is Dawes and I can answer that question for you. This terminal was constructed in 1961 and designed by Paul Williams. He was also the architect who designed the saucer in the middle of the airport that is beloved by just about anyone who comes through this airport. You see the original design of this terminal by Mr. Williams, didn't work out so he had to redesign it several times. What he was finally able to come up

with has defined LA in many ways and has stood the test off time. I'm no architect, but I know that he could have given up at some point, but he didn't. And he created something that makes LA a distinctive home for so many people. His tenacity at making this place work is what many people around this place view as an example about life. He never gave up so he is a hero to the people in this airport community. Did that answer your question?"

Jake was having flashbacks of his college lecture hall, but he politely replied, "Yes, thank you so much." He became convinced that today had been filled with either some strange coincidences or poignant synchronicities. Either way this day had shaped up to be one that he wouldn't forget. He decided to head back to the gate.

As Jake occupied the seat he was finally at ease because he had secured a seat on the next flight out. He had reflected for the last hour heavily on the events of the day. Whether he was making the right decision or not wasn't important anymore. He was just ready for the rest of life to begin as soon as it could. When he came to the Los Angeles International airport that morning he didn't expect it to become a day that would resonate in his mind for the rest of his days, but he certainly felt it would. Three relative strangers that he may never see again had become some of the most important people he ever met. He took a look around the terminal and wanted to remember every detail. The curved and cavernous ceiling that revealed the light that makes life possible in our solar system. The black contoured chairs that had cradled and ultimately irritated him but allowed reflection. He saw a sea of faces that held promise for someone else who was seeking answers. Jake liked Los Angeles, now. It was so full of light and warmth. LAX was now a sacred place for Jake.

Just then the flight attendant made an announcement. “We are now ready to board the flight and we would like to extend a warm welcome, whether you are on business or personal trip or just heading home to Chicago’s O’Hare International airport.”

Jake smiled and prepared to board the flight home.