

Story 1

We hugged Zoe.

'Take care. Look after yourself. Have a good time.'

'I will.'

'Don't forget: text, email.'

'Yes, yes. I know,' and she was off, walking towards the departure lounges to begin being scanned and x-rayed and processed for her journey to Nepal, India, Borneo. We watched until she walked through the metal detectors – nothing – and placed her belt and hand luggage on the x-ray and then went and had cappuccinos and croissant; served with a wipe on, wipe off smile by a girl who should have gone off shift an hour ago. Then DD cried a little and I felt awkward and suggested driving home.

That's it, a short story from The Grey Zone. It's a story about middle class parents seeing their middle class daughter off on gap year travels from which she will return with tales and new friends on the other side of the world. It's a story on continuous loop in airports around the world, day after day, month after month across time and space. And there are other continuous loop narratives in which others act out their parts in other stories of holiday or business trips or dashes across continents to see the newborn or dying. You can watch them in the vast spaces that are airports. The actors sit, tense, jaws locked as they squint at screens that don't show departure gates or breathe short shallow breaths as they walk quickly down long corridors towards somewhere far, far away.

The Grey Zone is a forgotten place where few people smile and almost no one laughs and if they do they're probably drunk and you really, really don't want to be travelling with them. It's the gateway to beginnings and ends of stories but hardly ever the parts you really want to know about. It is an anodyne, transitory space in which ceilings are designed to be high to prevent the suspicion that you will be crushed as you walk down one of those long corridors. It's something to do with perspectives and vanishing points. It is a place in which even the air is stripped of pollen and excess moisture and is then heated to a temperature your body can't detect as heat or cold. You think this is nothing more than a transit zone, a place of nothingness but you are wrong.

Oh, dear me, yes, how wrong can you be? Somewhere out there beyond the check in desks and the travel retail concessions there are grey men and women and this is their realm. They will count you out and they will count you back with all the impersonal disinterest of a heartless state machine. In the supposed interest of your safety they will take the makeup and water from my elderly mother on a trip to Ireland.

Story 2

My mother and I made it to Heathrow without incident and found our way to departure where our bags were scanned. The man, just doing his job, asked me to open my hand luggage. I hadn't packed a razor for three nights away. I'd buy one in Dublin.

‘Please would you open your bag?’

As I did so he asked: ‘Are you travelling on business or pleasure?’

‘Neither. I’m going to a funeral.’ As I said it I looked over at my mother, it was her cousin who had died, and she too was having her bags searched. The man looked in my bag and removed a tub of sandalwood shaving soap. It could go in the hold, or be thrown away but I could not take it on the plane. I told him to throw it away. He waved me on. I walked back towards Mum.

‘This way.’

‘I’m with my mother. I’m not leaving her.’

They weren’t suppose to let me walk three steps in the wrong direction but if they didn’t they were depriving someone of a designated carer, or something. As I approached I heard her say, as did others in the queue, ‘I’m eighty eight. I can’t stand here while you do this to me. You’ll have to get me a chair or I’ll faint.’ It should have been the old lady traveller’s trump card but it wasn’t quite good enough. She got the chair but lost the makeup and a bottle of water. They won. They always win. Just following the rules, that’s what they always say, that’s why they have to take the booties off a toddler so that they can send them through the shoe x-ray machine. Who knows what terrible retribution for being cruelly weaned at a tender age he might have decided to visit upon an unsuspecting world.

In France, the law says that you are guilty until proven innocent. It’s there, written into legal statute. In the world’s grey zones it is the unwritten law, always and everywhere. Remember that and be vigilant my friends for you know not the day nor the hour when the metal rod buzzes and uniformed security will start unloading your carefully packed bags, speaking to you with the vocabulary of politeness while doing it with a smug manner that makes you wonder if they used to get kicked more than the other boys during school football matches. Not that it matters. They know they’re where democracy makes sure that people who have never marched or jumped a red light get a glimpse of the iron grip that comes with the studied courtesy.

Story 3

I didn’t know it when I touched down at Ben Gurion airport but the best thing about Israel is that there are orange groves on the other side of the fencing. You step out of the aeroplane into blazing hot air thick with the aromas of jet fuel and oranges. It’s so good you could bottle it. Down the aeroplane steps and you enter a military state in which there are no male civilians between the ages of eighteen and sixty.

Through immigration I asked a young woman behind the tourist information desk for directions. She told me where to go and turned to deal with the next person. ‘Excuse me, could you also...’

Then she was shouting and the men with guns – which meant everybody - were looking our way. ‘I’ve told you. Out of that door, turn right, go.’ No studied courtesy there. I guess in some places the rules just don’t apply, any of them.

Final Rant

If there is one thing you – or at any rate I –expect to be trouble free in the airports of the world it’s the business of buying stuff. The spokespeople for the international architectural practices that design these spaces will tell you different but they are all reassuringly similar. Safe local products and international brands line shelves in

their shiny bottles and glistening cartons lit by the very latest arrangements of floods and spots. Any chance you had of a bargain or being able to tell stories about meeting 'a man who' was left outside, beyond the automatic glass doors. On the other hand, the products are expensive but the watches and fragrances are what they say they are. And even if they are expensive it's a last ditch chance to buy a present or offload the last of the holiday money.

Not in Delhi Airport, my friends. You are returning home from India, a land where every price is argued over. Nothing is bought or sold without buyer and seller having to decide how badly they want to close the deal. Every price is determined by the moment. The market analysts would love it – until the trader plays his trump card: no change. He (it's always a he) never has change but won't tell you till he has your note in his hand. One more argument or one more tourist suckered. Not in Delhi Airport, you think. There goods are labelled and priced. No argument needed, except that no one has told you that they won't accept their own money in the duty free outlets. Not unless you have an Indian passport and I'm a British citizen left to launch into one more rant about crap currency so useless even its own nation wants nothing to do with it. They sold me the notes and now they don't want their own money. They have devalued their currency to an exchange rate of zero, making it less useful than the tissues in my pocket.

Only in the grey zones of the world does that happen. Only in the grey zones do the rules slip and slide.