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Step forward, please – Short Story

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The shuttle arrives and I find myself wondering how many pat-down searches I can provoke on this trip.

This is before you remove the mp3 player and step onto the shining floor, which is somehow still grimy from foot traffic. This is before the endless tannoy announcements, the families with bags blocking every available queue, and before you really begin to engage with the process of being processed.

I might as well try and beat my record. I could leave a cigarette lighter in my pocket to set off the bodyscanner and metal-detector. I could do this repeatedly in transit through Schipol and beat my record of 4 pat-downs in a trip. Apparently this is what passes for entertainment after a few weeks in transit.

For all the bodies and invasive procedures, nobody actually touches you in an airport. Instead you stock-up on affect and intimacy through the airport bookshop. Perhaps you'd like to purchase that edgy new novel everyone's talking about? Or you can pay for timed access to the wifi. The very architecture of these places encourages you to glide through the environment, past the kiosks, through the herd, rather than to bump or connect. You slide across the floors rather than walk.

The airport is cold. Everything moves here but nothing is actually alive. You sit on a toilet seat upon which thousands of others have squatted, but it won't ever be warm. Nobody ever touches you. No-one will bump into you on a plane either. Or make eye contact. The person you've blocked in while you've been sleeping in the aisle seat will perform amazing aerobatics over the armrests just to avoid ever once making contact. You'll queue for hours but you will maintain the obligatory 6 inch distance from the body in front of you, and you'll get annoyed if someone nudges your backpack from behind. And despite being locked into a tube with other people's breath and smells for god knows how many hours, no-one will ever touch you.

And I find myself wondering about the cigarette lighter in my pocket. Can I just leave it there through security? Can I provoke some kind of interaction with the bodies on the other side of the machine? Can I get a person who spends all day watching thousands of faces in mobility to stop and make contact? And would it mean anything?

And with brief panic I reflect on the state of my subconscious. Why do I always wear baggy trousers which require a belt whenever I have to pass through security checks? The belt has to come off, of course. It always does. The voice of sanity, of convenient reason, pleads that it's a comfort-decision – based upon the flights ahead. But I wonder about that belt that I always have to remove, leaving baggy trousers perilously clinging about me. Why do I keep ending up in this situation? Is this an appropriate moment to invoke Freud? Silencing that uncomfortable thought I wonder about that cigarette lighter in my pocket. How many pat-downs can I actively provoke today? Can I make someone see me?

And other people are doing these kinds of things too. They are reacting to the hostile airport environment. There's a man sitting at the bar with his something-and-coke, asking the pretty young barmaid about her children. "She's two, oh they're great at that age, make sure you enjoy them..." As you wander past looking busy. "Did you know that if you pay them extra and become a club member, the airline staff will use your name as you board?" It might be nice if someone used my name today. They push a button, they know your life history – but no-one has yet used my name.

The overhead tannoy warns us to 'brace brace brace' upon any threat of impact.

Is there worth in provoking an interaction? Is it my right, when the airport regime looks through my clothes, my skin, my organs? I mean, these people have seen me in ways that not even my wife has. And yet it's always cold. They see darkly. No-one ever touches you in an airport. Even when they pat-you-down, it's just an airport going through its motions – not a person who accidentally bumps you, or a touch that means anything. It's the security equivalent of the shiny (dirty) floor. No contact here please. Keep moving. Don't obstruct the flow of bodies.

But what about the potential of manufacturing contact? Of provoking touch while it remains abstract and cold in many ways? Is this important? Is this what affect and entertainment have been reduced to when the subject is mobile?

There isn't going to be anyone waiting for me at the other end of this journey. Somehow that becomes important as the cigarette lighter slips from my mind. I step forward in the line. The instruction sheet reads: "Please remove all bulky clothing but don't for one second feel anything, or dare to mention that this could be sexual – jokes are now forbidden, you know". I approach the security check with trousers held up with one hand, of course, and I smile. Lighter in pocket as I step through the metal detector I hear the alarms begin to sound. A voice beckons: "Step forward please".

You strike the obligatory Jesus Christ pose as hands pat your pockets, your legs, and everybody looks on. If you let this happen with a big smile on your face, nobody quite knows how to react. Especially the security staff. I am resisting this process through my obvious enjoyment of every second of it. People aren't too sure about that... But there's nothing anyone can do to stop you.

And then you're free to leave. That was it – the highlight of your day. It's over. And you rejoin the throng of bodies passing through duty-free, offered scents and raffle tickets for an expensive car. Brace, brace, brace.

Everything is forgotten and you once again find yourself by the enormous glass windows, watching jump-suited people feeding planes with aviation fuel and removing waste with hoses. With a complete lack of irony, you order a beer, locate the toilets and begin to countdown the minutes until boarding.

People sit at adjacent tables – too far for contact, too close to ignore – chatting awkwardly. Time is passing too slowly and you grow ever more sensitive to the frustration of people responding to the tannoy announcements that such-and-such flight will be delayed until 19:00 hours for technical reasons. You accidentally make awkward eye contact with the man opposite. Brace, brace, brace. I cannot wait to get on that plane, one step closer to home, even though the plane will be exactly the same as this. What a life.

And then suddenly something magical happens. Is that Michael Stipe singing? That's definitely Michael Stipe – what song is this? And you concentrate hard to block out the tannoy and the music from the other bars, tilting your head towards the bar and towards R.E.M. It's got to be 'nightswimming'. That piano riff is unmistakable. And suddenly everybody stops. *Everything stops.*

The tannoy ceases to bray. And out of respect for 'nightswimming' the other bars turn off their music. People stop moving. Transit ceases. And suddenly there is a 'we'. We're alone in this deserted airport with only R.E.M to guide us. I look around and everyone is swaying. The flow of people past the bar has vanished. With eyes half closed and drinks resting on the table-tops, everybody is semi-present – letting Michael Stipe's voice move through them, and restraining themselves from singing their favourite lines. "I'm not sure all these people understand/It's not like years ago – the fear of getting caught/The recklessness of water/They cannot see me naked/These things they go away – replaced by everyday/Nightswimming deserves a quiet night".

And I'm not from braced for impact – far from it. I notice that my hand is gripping the edge of the table, nails digging into the wood to stop from physically singing along. And everybody is respectfully silent. And we all look around, sharing a few smiles. There is a 'we'. The barman whistles along with the piano riff as he wipes the tables. When was the last time we heard the tannoy? When did someone last walk past? When did I last hear someone speak? We all sway and it's bliss.

But all too soon it's over. The chatter rises, the moment is lost. People are moving past again in herds. Flight #173 to wherever is still delayed, and it is still requested that people visit information desk three for their refreshment vouchers. People go back to their separate lives, their conversations rise, and a wall of people once again bustles through the airport.

The moment is lost. But it was there. I saw it. And as I move to the plane, I occasionally hear quiet whistles of the 'Nightswimming' refrain from people I pass on the way to gate 53 – testament to the fact that something magical really did happen, if all too briefly. I try to catch their eyes, and fail.

I'm tempted to switch to academic prose to explain the point of this story, if there even is one. To tell you something about intimacy in the face of airport technologies which atomise and process, about people who don't see each other, about technologies which utilise people in their quest to see darkly. But in truth, all I can really say for sure is that whatever an airport is – there are ways of defeating it. Michael Stipe did it with just a voice and a piano, and his success dwarfed my smiling Jesus Christ pose through security. And after 6 weeks in transit, that was truly special. For 3-and-a-half minutes, no-one bought anything, no-one moved anywhere, and we shared something. There was no airport. There was security in the sense that we were together, not apart. Something touched us in a way that pat-down searches and a biometric ID's were unable to comprehend. Thank you Michael Stipe.