

Departures

by Rebecca N. McKinnon

In her nightmares she fought flaming metal birds as her family watched on, silent and safe, from the ground. She woke with a headache that broke her concentration across every task she tried to complete that morning.

She'd made some friends at the ward, and they wished her wellness. She tensed at each embrace. Each unexpected pat on the back made her jump. She felt them beyond each set of opening, closing, locking doors. Watching her.

Had she forgotten anything? She triple-checked her duffle bag while a nurse retrieved her purse from the lockers. Finally, she snatched her purse back. Leapt into it to retrieve her phone. Mashed the power button until the screen rose like a beautiful, electric sun whose sole purpose was to show her...no messages. She cursed and called a cab, then sent a few texts before walking out, the actual sun meeting her like an awkward acquaintance. Yes, it'd been a while.

She leaned forward to get a look at the taxi's speedometer and sighed. The driver eyed her reflection in the rearview, and she fell back, hunched against the door frame. She alternated between glaring out the window and checking her phone for nonexistent notifications.

They slowed in traffic, inching along with household minivans and commuter carpools. Apprehension dared her to reach for her pills. She told herself she didn't need them. She cracked her knuckles, one after another, as they flew down the 'Terminal A' ramp. She checked her phone again, for the time. Would she make it?

The sounds of rolling luggage against tile grout, fussing babies on bobbing hipbones, and papers crinkling within closed fists surrounded her, overwhelmed her as she jogged through the airport.

At the check-in counter stood a skinny man in a polo.

"We can't check anymore baggage."

She held up her duffle bag, small enough for carry-on.

He nodded and began typing, his fingers deft and certain. She held tight onto the countertop's edge to keep her own fingers from tapping, from trembling.

Another passenger—a man, towering tall—approached to her left and slid his ID to a second polo—a man, heavysset with a quivering neck. Skinny Polo and Fat Polo typed. Tall Guy tapped his foot on the concrete floor, tapped his fingers on the countertop. His tapping and the polos' clacking made her nauseous.

A man in a starched button-up emerged from a room behind the counter, checking his wristwatch. He rose an index finger that silenced the polos' clacking.

"Four minutes after," he declared.

"What is that supposed to mean?" snapped Tall Guy.

She asked her polo the same question but only with her widening eyes.

Button-Up expounded: "No check in. Forty five minutes before boarding is cut off."

Tall Guy shook his head. "My watch says eight."

"No. It's four minutes after."

"No! It's eight o'clock!"

Tall Guy gesticulated at Button-Up, at his wrist, at Button-Up again.

The panicked perspiration began where it always does—on her hairline. She felt the beginnings of hyperventilation—a tightening knot in her chest. She swallowed again and again to untie it—a trick she'd learned in high school. It wasn't working; her breaths came quick and uneven, and she clutched at the knot, grabbing onto a fistful of blouse instead.

After Button-Up had disappeared into the back, Skinny Polo leaned forward.

"I'm not supposed to tell you this, but there are check-in kiosks behind you."

The forsaken passengers reached the kiosks as two people might reach a touchscreen soda machine in the desert.

Yet the touchscreen gave them a dry error: "Kiosk check-in unavailable. Please see attendant."

She lost hope at that point, but Tall Guy would not abdicate, a mad resolution fueling his footsteps. He approached the counter with a shout: "*You will give me my boarding pass because I have paid for it and it is mine!*" Button-Up returned from the back to debate him.

She combatted her hyperventilation while walking—a slow step for every inhale, a slow step for every exhale. She eventually reached Skinny Polo again. He looked from his computer screen to her teetering form.

"I have a 1:11pm."

She supported her forehead with the palm of her right hand and breathed and breathed and breathed.

He softly urged: "One seat left on a 1:11."

Beside them, Tall Guy upped his volume from a frustrated shout to a booming roar.

"IS THIS THE WAY YOU MANAGE A BUSINESS-"

"Nothing sooner?"

"-TURNING AWAY PAYING CUSTOMERS?"

"No."

She couldn't tell if Skinny Polo felt sympathy or disaffection for her; his demeanor was stoic yet friendly, impassive yet considerate. He'd learned a lesson she'd struggled her whole life to comprehend, a lesson the other passenger had no interest in being taught.

"That's fine," she said to her polo.

"I'm fine," she said to herself.

She held her breath to steady her hand and watched herself take the new boarding pass as if in third person. Somebody else living in her body. She needed to sit, desperately. By the time she found a bench, she was hyperventilating again, and though she told herself not to, she checked her phone. No messages.

The sob she'd been swallowing took over her stranger body, reclaimed her. She fumbled with her purse, dove into its contents, and came up for air with a familiar orange bottle in her grasp. She opened it, tipped it, and threw her head back like laughing.

Strangers passed her while she wept.

They questioned nothing.

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