

TERMINAL

Merle H. Graffam

1-10-2007

© MHG 2007

1,857 WORDS

Since 911 I've been nervous about flying. I'm sitting in a terminal, waiting. Terminal. What an unfortunate name for the place you wait to voluntarily place yourself in a huge metal cylinder hooked up to immense rockets meant to throw you in a controlled fall configuration 6 miles into the thin air with some guy you will never meet at the controls. What could that oversized thermos weigh? How could it keep from plunging like an arrow back into the earth?

Thoughts like these plague me at times like this. I look around. Some people look more nervous than I. Others seem oblivious to the danger. One man just sits in his trench-coat checking out everything. Ceiling fixtures, tiles on the walls, signs, another potential passenger. Potential victim. He seems serene, relaxed. I go to sit beside him.

He looks up.

"How ya doing?" he says.

"Fine. And you?" I ask.

"Just peachy," he says.

I don't really know why I changed my seat. Maybe I thought being next to a guy who seemed so at ease might rub off on my frazzled nerves. I don't feel secure. I'm vulnerable. Being close to another human who is not as paranoid as myself somehow seems the thing to do.

"Chicago?" I ask.

"Yeh," he says, "going to see my daughter and her new baby.

I look at my shoes. He continues looking my way.

"You look nervous," he says. "First flight?"

"No," I shake my head, "got thousands of hours under my belt, but since the Twin Towers I'm as nervous as a cat."

"Understandable," he says, "but I think of that old joke."

"Which one," I ask.

"You know, the joke about the fact that the chance there's a bomb on any given flight is over a million to one, so this guy figures, if the chances of a bomb being on my plane is one million to one, then the chances of their being two bombs on the same plane has to be in the billions. So he smuggles in his own bomb."

I laugh nervously and he can see the fear still there behind my eyes.

"Lighten up," he says. "Flying is the safest form of travel in the world."

"Yeh," I say, "but when I get in an accident with my car I don't fall 30,000 feet."

He laughs appreciably and pats the back of my hand. I can tell by his look he noticed it is clammy.

"Everything's gong to be okay with our plane," he says. "Engine is fine, pilot isn't drunk, no terrorists or planted bombs, no freak storms or unexpected turbulence. Everything's going to go just right this time."

"How can you know that?"

He smiles. "I have a gift."

"Hmmm." I say trying to mask my doubt. I sit silently for a while until the curiosity wells so strong I have ask.

"You're going to make me ask, aren't you?" I say.

"There is no answer to an unasked question, my friend," he says.

I wait. He doesn't say anything.

"Okay. *Okay!* Tell me please what this gift you have is."

“You said please, so here it is. I can see the edges of things,” he said.

“What? The edges of things? What in the world do you mean?”

“Well, since I was very small I could see where things ended and where other things began. I could see the edges, those places where one thing ceased to be that thing and became another thing entirely. It’s not as easy to see as you might think.”

I pondered this for a few seconds, then realized that I was not doing homage to my paranoia and began to worry again. He must have seen this lapse because he brought me back to the conversation.

“Forget about the flight. You asked a question and I’m trying to answer it to kill time.”

“You have to use the word kill?” I said.

He ignored what I had asked.

“I can see the difference between one thing and another,” he explained.

“That doesn’t seem to me to be a unique gift. We can all do that,” I argued.

“Okay. Let me ask you this. You see out there beyond the window? That’s Phoenix, Arizona. Those are mountains and valleys on the horizon. The mountains are pointing up toward the sky and the valleys separate them.”

“Yes,” I said, not seeing his point at all, “so?”

“Where, my friend, does the mountain end and the valley begin? At what precise moment are you looking at the down-trending side of that mountain and begin seeing the rising of the valley sides to meet it?”

Looking beyond his finger I began to get his drift.

“I have always been able to mark in my mind where the valley left off and the mountain began. I can see the edges of both,” he said with a wink and a smile.

“Ah, but that’s just a value judgment,” I protested. “Who says you’re right about where one ends and one begins?”

“I do,” he said.

“You do? But what about the rest of us?”

“So what *about* the rest of you?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t know, but doesn’t it matter what the rest of us feel about your assessment?”

“Not to me,” he said confidently.

Paranoia was nibbling again at the edges of my reason, wherever they might be, and I said, “The ultimate question is where the edge of the plane and the edge of the mountain might come together.”

“You can’t think that way and be settled,” he said. “I have found that my little gift has brought great solace and peace to me.

“When I was a child I was shy and self conscious, worried that my hair was messed up, that I might stink, that my clothes didn’t fit right. What other people thought meant everything to me. If they didn’t think well of me, I reasoned, I must not be worthy of their affection. I began to look at other people in the same way I looked at myself and found they too had messed up hair and clothes that didn’t fit. They had dirt under their fingernails, teeth a little yellow, but it didn’t matter much to me. I still liked them. They were my friends, my neighbors, my family.

“There’s a saying. A friend is someone whose shit doesn’t stink. It means you overlook the flaws in others that have traits more important to you. In my looking I

gained the gift. Even if the people I saw who were immaculately dressed, quaffed by professionals, washed to the point of shining, they still had their flaws. I could see a hair out of place somewhere, a flake of dandruff, a tiny booger in the nose, a wrinkle on the shirt, a button with a thread sticking out. I could see even farther. I could see that tiny hole in a sock, hidden deeply within a shiny shoe. I could see a stitch underneath the pant cuff that was not quite right.

“It wasn’t just people either. I could see lath and plaster behind the paint in the walls, the padding and concrete and dirt beneath the carpet. I could see the brads that hold the picture in place behind the photo and cardboard hanging on the wall, and even the hanger and wire on the hidden nail. I could see how upholstery tacks hold the folded edges and the staples on the wood frame on the couch. I could see the manufacturer’s tag hidden below the springs. My X-ray vision developed more focus over the years. I began to realize that nothing is ever as smooth and neat as we see it on the surface. There is depth to everything, edges not apparent on first view. There were nails in the studs, bent ones pounded flush rather than extracted after a misjudged swing. Fiberglass insulation lay loosed between 2x4s, snaking electrical wires ran through drilled holes from box to sockets. Everything had hidden depths. The upturned hem of a skirt. Underclothes, body hair, moles, scars.

“I began to see things as they really were, warts and all. It brought me peace. I quit judging myself so harshly, and, in the process, began to quit judging others as well. I began to trust, to have faith in things. I quit looking at edges as ends. I began to see everything as a whole, though fragmented, though segmented, as rough as the universe actually is. Three dimensional, four, five, who knows? Everything as it is, as it should be.”

Here was a philosopher, I thought. Is there anything to learn here? Possibly. At any rate my mind was being messaged into relaxing from my fear of flying. I could see he was looking around again, not caring what I thought of what he had just said. Or maybe he was just letting me digest his lecture.

“You have certainly made me think,” I said. He looked over and smiled.

“Priorities,” he said. “You can’t control the universe. You can barely control yourself. You can look at it, analyze it, and react appropriately. That’s all you can do. But, you *can* look at it.”

“I think I get it.”

“No,” he said, “You don’t get it yet, but you will if you take time to think about it. Find out first what your own edges are, then look at others and see their edges, what separates you from them. Where you end and they begin. Where you touch. Where are the valleys? Where the mountains? Then get up to 30,000 feet and look at them to see what they are as a group. Where does the group begin? Where does it end? Where are the edges of the earth and where are the edges of the moon? Do that and you will soon see that there are edges everywhere and that there are hidden seams and stitches everywhere, holding it together. You are worried about death, about losing your edges to something else. You are worried that your slip is showing. Think of Alfred E. Neumann. Don’t worry so much.”

Somehow, not understanding much of what he had said, I felt better. I wasn’t afraid, at least at the moment.

“Passengers will board for Flight 823 for Chicago at Gate B-8,” the announcer blared over the PA system.

“That’s your flight, my friend,” he said.

I got up and said, “I thought you were going on this flight with me.”

“Hell no!” He said. “There’s a hole in a fuel line on this plane. I can see it. Just under that wing. Can’t you see it? Didn’t I teach you well enough?”

A cold shiver ran up my back and I had to catch my breath.

“Hah!” he said, slapping me on the back. “You’re too easy, my friend. There’s nothing at all wrong with this plane.” He picked up his hand luggage and headed for the line with me just behind.

“By the way,” he said, “there’s a hole in your jockey shorts.”