

AIRPORT ANONYMITY

I have a confession. I LOVE being alone. Don't get me wrong, I adore the people in my life and I don't want them to feel slighted, but sometimes I just like mingling with the masses, no one caring who I am or what I'm doing. I find being anonymous a great way to see the kindness—and crassness—in strangers. Take my waiter at O'Hare's Marcaroni Grill today, terminal 3 not far from American Airlines gate K2. He clearly is pressed due to short staffing, yet he has the time to encourage me to try the tiramisu. Okay, some may want to think that he's just trying to upcharge me, but I got the feeling he just didn't want me to miss it, particularly since I only ate half of my lasagna bolognese. I could have eaten the whole thing, after all, no one was looking, and who would know? Truthfully, my stomach would and probably the poor person who will be sitting next to me on my flight. And besides, it was a red sauce version, without any bechamel. Shameful. After a little back and forth with my waiter, he did convince me to get the tiramisu and it was well worth the extra calories, even as I patted myself on the back for only eating half of that too.

As I was leaving the restaurant, I noticed a woman clearly in no mood to be denied anything. When being told she had to wait for a table, she scoffed at the hostess and said, "Don't you realize I have a plane to catch in twenty minutes?" I don't think it dawned on her that the other 149,999 people at the airport were in the same predicament, nor would she care if she did know. She probably is the definition of a "Karen," but since that's my name, I don't identify with the presumptions and I don't like to promote the use of it. Just pick someone you can't stand. Go ahead, I'll wait. You got it? Okay, that's what you should call her.

My flight is late, but I don't mind. Did I mention I just had a huge glass of Sauvignon Blanc and I'm wandering the

concourse with free abandon since I can't get into any of the lounges because my Priority Pass only gets me a discount at Headphone Hub, and that's all the way over by gate E1A? Why did I get that thing anyway?

I stop at Hudson News wondering if my book will ever get published and be on display at one of their tables, fantasizing about some stranger reading the back cover, then deciding to buy it as I stand there. Should I offer to sign it, or keep my glee to myself? Will they chuckle out loud on their flight, annoying their seat partner as they read it or will their eyes begin to glaze over as their head nods? I pray for the former. I know I should buy one of the New York Times best sellers displayed on the table, but I opt for People Magazine, a guilty pleasure I've had since 1974.

Next door is InMotion, another one of those places that sells overpriced headphones and earbuds. I'm always on the lookout for a comfortable pair, the kind that loop over the back of ears and has a quarter sized cushioned earpiece that sits against the ear, not in it. I just can't wear earbuds because the openings to my ears are too small. They never stay in and I hate the way they feel. I bought a great over-the-ear pair at Brookstones at least fifteen years ago, but now I can't find anything like them anywhere. If you have any leads, please let me know.

Ooh look! Gate K-19 is going to Paris! I could wake up to croissants, cafe au lait, and the smell of Gitanes filling the air. I've got my Amex card. I could do it. I really could. Paris is gorgeous this time of year. Across the hallway, another flight is leaving for Dubai. From what I can tell, Dubai is a made-up utopian city built in the middle of the desert that makes Vegas seem pedestrian. I'm fascinated by how it was built and the extravagance it holds. I'd love to go there, but damn, I don't have my passport with me. Maybe I should grab the flight to Honolulu. I love the way the humid air hits you just as you leave the plane and it's sweet how

you're always greeted with a dendrobium lei. I wonder if I still like Mai Tais or if they are too sweet for me now. As I stand in the middle of the hallway pondering my options, people scurry by, some even hitting my bag in their haste. One woman almost barrels into me, taking me out of my slightly inebriated fantasy world. It's a good thing because I realize I've just been called for my flight home and all my underwear is heading to LaGuardia.

Now finally in my seat, we're told that air traffic control doesn't have a spot for us at the moment and we have to pull back from the gate and wait on the tarmac an additional 45 minutes. Had my father still been alive, his head would be exploding right about now. But all is well in my world with nothing pressing as I return home from a multi-day trip visiting my mother-in-law in her independent living apartment where the undersized full bed sags in the middle and my husband and I fall into each other—not in a good way. I can only last so long there, my spine feeling as if it's been twisted into a pretzel. He stays a few more days to help her with her computer and take her out to Red Lobster, assuming it's not Bingo night. Which means I have two days where I can watch rom-coms without my husband scoffing at me because I should be watching something of great import like *The Mandalorian*.

We're finally clear for take off as the sun sets to the west of Lake Michigan. The skies are multiple shades of red, a sailor's delight. The woman next to me is alone too, snapping her seatbelt shut as she smiles with a type of sisterly acknowledgement. Her head pressed against the window, it's not long before she falls asleep. I envy her, since I never can sleep on planes. I look over at her, wondering about her story, knowing I shouldn't ask. Maybe she needs some time to herself, to collect her thoughts or just take a rest with no one to bother her. I'm glad I have the aisle seat. She looks so at peace. I wouldn't want to disturb her. I know how she

must feel.