

Community of Strangers

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I think I should feel alone, but I do not. I think I should feel like a zebra in a herd of slate-colored elephants, but I don't. Perhaps I should feel like some people do every day, like they are unseen, unnoticed, and unloved. Instead, I feel like I'm at a strange kind of family reunion. I don't really know anyone, but I feel as if I do. The young parents with the three blonde little ones remind me of a family I babysit for. The youngest cherub, Lily, has bright blue eyes which happen to be tear-filled at the moment. My eyes would probably be tear-filled, too, if I had had a long day and was cooped up in a stroller in a sea of humanity instead of at home in my soft bed.

Then there are the businessmen. They are sitting all in a row, like piano keys in their various combinations of black, white, and gray suits. One is talking to his wife, one to his four-year-old son, and the rest are negotiating deals with clients or checking stocks on their laptops. I feel sorry for them, practically living here. My dad used to be one of them, but now he works from home, and things are much better. The garishly lipsticked woman and her married daughter have just finished browsing through shops filled with over-priced peanut M&Ms and water bottles. They take a seat to finish waiting with everyone else.

The basketball boys from Toronto are tall and lean, trading stories with their coaches about timeouts, movies, and other things I don't overhear. The army boys are young, so young. They are fresh from basic training on their way home for a short visit. They talk in low, incredulous tones about one of their fellow soldiers who is getting discharged. They are rough around the edges, small town Southern boys who have decided to cast their lot with Uncle Sam.

I wonder about the man with the daughter. He cannot be over thirty, and she is probably two. They are alone, and I secretly hope this tender twosome has a caring wife and mother somewhere. The little girl's face is quick to smile. It is one of those giddy, precious smiles that can turn a heart from stone to oatmeal. What about the girl with the long legs? She is wearing blue high-top sneakers, a jean cut-off miniskirt, and a white t-shirt. This should not be so. She has long, wavy, auburn hair that frames a face with big, liquid eyes the color of coffee. She is beautiful. She doesn't need the heavy eyeliner or the short skirt. She needs someone to let her know that she is beautiful without them.

Before I know it, I have spent almost ten hours in airports and on airplanes. I have been through security, watched how seats become flotation devices, and talked about weddings with a fifty-five-year-old woman from Oregon. I have seen people scrambling to find their boarding passes, dash upstream through a current of humanity and luggage, and smile thankfully as their name is called off of the standby list.

I don't know these people. Should I not feel a smallness, an isolation as I stand alone among strangers waiting for my flight to Phoenix? It would seem so, but there is a peculiar community among hundreds who are alone. The woman on my left may not share my views of grace and faith, but we both like the Sudoku puzzles in the plane magazine. The man on my right doesn't even speak English, but I smile and nod when he passes me my bottle of water and salted peanuts, and he smiles back. There's a good chance I would not be friends with them in real life, but this is not real life; it's the airport.