



Source: Martin Chulov, 'Joy and impatience on Gaza frontier', *The Australian online*, 17/11/05.

Tags: [security](#), [travel](#), [dystopia](#)  
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Although the cabin is still in darkness, the passengers are stirring, lining up by the now permanently full onboard toilets, after the twelve hour flight from Shanghai. He has slept sporadically in small parcels of time—an hour here, half an hour there—and in his fastidiousness he cannot bear the thought of washing and shaving in the unclean lavatories, savouring instead the dream of a slow shower at the airport, of clean clothes and stretching his long body, cramped now in this seat designed for bodies smaller than his.

The cabin lights are on and breakfast quickly served, eaten, trays hastily removed and an announcement over the PA that the cabin is to be disinfected. Cabin crew are walking briskly down the aisles with aerosol sprays, contaminating the air with a sickly smell. A voice announces in three languages that the aircraft will land in Paris in one hour—at 1pm Beijing time, while outside first light slowly spreads through the smoky haze hanging low over the city as the plane circles Charles De Gaulle.

He wonders about time, here in the air above time, where duration is marked simply and without any real relation to place, so that time itself becomes entirely unstable, as it is when you are sitting by the bed of someone who is dying and you are attuned only to the change of breath. International travel always seemed to him a kind of death watch, followed by jetlag, the body mourning the loss of time, slowly recovering a sense of place.

It is chaos in the baggage area, with no room to move and hundreds of people looking for their things, as if they have re-entered a city after some disaster. Three full flights have arrived at the same time from different parts of the world—from Dakar, from the Seychelles and from Shanghai—and exhausted adults, grandparents, children are crushed together, waiting for the appearance of bags, which duly arrive, dishevelled, lying on their backs, like a row of dead cockroaches.

The African passengers are more alert, more attentive to the zone of increased anxiety they have entered in this border space. Everyone's face takes on a look of concern whenever some checkpoint requires a comparison between an actual face and the face in a travel document.

He notices one large group has just cleared customs with a mountain of luggage, including a bag that looks like his, and he loses hope that his things will ever arrive. When he feels anything at all in this state, he senses a weariness spreading through his body, but after a couple of days in the same clothes and little sleep, he notices how fatigue strips away different layers of bodily awareness, attuning him to less superficial concerns of hygiene and he ceases to notice his own or anyone else's body odour.

When finally his luggage arrives, he regards it as a small miracle and as he lugs the large suitcase onto the trolley, he remembers again why travel is so tedious for someone

bookish like himself, the weight of books now weighing upon him in the overfull bag, the heaviness of his occupation brought home.

Reunited with his things, now he feels he has arrived, and that he is alive again, no longer in the suspended animation of air-travel. He remembers that he is in his body and longs for the shower he has promised himself. Off he goes in search of well-appointed ablutions, up and down the entire length of the terminal building. He finds an information counter and is directed towards an Air France lounge at the other end of the terminal. After another trudge through the terminal, he locates a reception desk. A well-dressed receptionist looks him up and down and asks for his boarding pass, which he retrieves. She takes a look at it and views him with, it seems to him, increasing disdain:

'I'm sorry sir, but this facility is only available to Business and First Class passengers.'

He asks her to direct him to a facility where Economy Class passengers are allowed to take showers and is told that no such facility any longer exists in the terminal and that he should go to a hotel. He points out that he cannot check into his hotel in the centre of Paris until midday, which is six hours from now and that, he confesses, he is taken aback to discover that only Business Class and First Class people are entitled to the dignity of cleanliness after a long period of travel. [I am, in fact, protecting you from the torrent of foul language he has, in his outrage, poured upon the completely impervious functionary guarding this inner sanctum of comfort for Business Class people.]

'This is a private business, not a public service', she responds when his torrent subsides, and no, she cannot call the manager because it is only 6.00am and he is still asleep.

He has the good sense, even in his exhausted and filthy state, to realize that his fury, in this, his own little shower scene, is a waste of time and likely to generate a 'security threat' in the building, even though he sees in this small disappearance of service the entire end of civilization as he has come to know it.

He retreats to the familiar, to a café and a newspaper and then he calls Barbara, who is calm and welcoming and they agree to have lunch at Chez Marianne. A few minutes later, sitting on the curb waiting for the bus to Gare du Lyon, he notices there is still a pall of smoke in the direction of Clichy sous Bois, or perhaps Aulnay. The sun is shining and he realises he still has a packet of cigarettes in his pocket, even though he has given up, so he turns to the young Arab man sitting beside him and asks for a light, breathing in deeply and then exhaling.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Helen Grace.*