

The Random 4

Stranded in Detroit

My end of many beginnings was the launch of my late year plans. I was going to my hometown to take care of some well needed business. The obligations I was carrying from Florida was worrying me a little. Went to Tampa airport to start a chain of flights on a sunny day. Said my goodbyes, checked in, cleared security, and went into an empty plane. “A short flight to Detroit” I told myself “don’t give in and fall asleep now; next one is the long one.”

Landed smoothly at Detroit, even a tiny bit earlier than expected. I felt better about my short layover. It was going to be easier to catch the next flight. I saw my connection’s gate information on the screen, and repeated it to myself for it to stick. Another fellow passenger of my route overheard my mumbling and joined me. We started chit chatting. An easy to talk to, down to earth girl with a nice smile. Pauline was a tourist in Florida. She felt that Miami had nothing touristic or nice to offer; just like any other honest tourist Miami ever had. Hearing what I always thought from her made me a little happy inside. She needed to go back to her home in Belgium to start working. A nice job description, her job consisted of entertaining young children. She picked playing laser-tag with kids as the example activity.

Florida work needed to be addressed, especially the comments about the new paper I submitted the day before. After a short review of the information at the gate, I left and found myself a seat. Some emails, some typing, some reading to make sure everything is in order... The written boarding time came and passed before I know it. We weren’t boarding.

I walked towards the gate and found Pauline there. There was a short delay. We chatted more as we wait to board. I learned that she was supposed to connect flights from Atlanta, but there was a delay. She changed her route to include Detroit after she got recommended that this would be faster. That was what she identified as her mistake. Standing right under gate’s information screens, we started socializing with other people as they come and go. Not long after the first delay, came the second one. A lot of faces dropped at the gate. We listened to the reason all together. The front light of the cockpit wasn’t working. They had a spare at the hangar. It was going to take some time to go get and install, but everything was under control. We got assured that the crew was good to fly till 2 am. It was not going to be a problem, the issue was going to be resolved by midnight and the crew was going to fly us safely to our destination.

Me and Pauline kept chatting about the job she needs to catch on Monday morning. I suggested walking around the airport a little bit. I remembered the inter-terminal tunnel with the shooting lights. This wasn’t the first time I had extra time in Detroit airport. I spent 5 hours there last time my mom decided to buy a ticket on her own. The tunnel was close to our gate. We walked it back and forth talking. The tunnel was as weird as ever. We talked about me working at a university, her being a medical student and trying to pick a field of focus. I made my preemptive guess on what she will pick without knowing her much, but influencing her by writing something here won’t be fair.

The gate crowd was, if anything, more upset when we came back 15 minutes later. The delay was in effect. There were snacks and warm soda cans on some pushcarts to keep the stuck passengers busy. Snacks wasn’t cutting it though. People needed to steam off and the airline employees were feeling this heat over the counter.

Grégory, a cool French man with an Indiana hoodie and style cut facial hair, joined us at the counter. I thought he was a proud Indiana University student at first. We shared short stories. Me, Turkey, leisure and business... Pauline, work Monday, Belgium... Grégory was on a vacation around Washington D.C. and the Indiana area with his family. They had a road trip and saw acres of corn fields. He needed to cut his vacation short and go be back on top his DHL customer relations position in a couple days. Him and I kept chatting, and later looked at his Washington photos. I have added Washington D.C. to my short-list of places to see.

We were hanging out around the gate to catch the next delay announcement of the dreaded 2

am. The pilot himself announced that if the mechanics can find the broken cable out of the gillion cables in the cockpit we could still go. At that moment 2 am was just a placeholder. We kept on chatting with people at the gate. No two people were trying to go to the same final destination, our lives were just intersecting at this one flight. The one flight that made us all miserable together.

Snacks in front of the counter got paper-thin blankets and pillows added to them. Bright red blankets created a new fashion trend at the only gate that still had some people. We were officially the last flight of the day. A tribe of mostly angry people sitting and waiting for one broken cable in their tribal colors. People were fed up and angry, the group that I was in... not so much. We kept it humorous. The situation was not ideal, but were the mechanics going to find the cable any faster if we were to join the grumpy side?

Around that time we also got Cameron added to the named people of this story. Tall, sympathetic guy, putting his money on a prayer circle to improve our chances of a timely take off. He was a seventeen year-old on his way to Germany to payback a visit to the exchange student he hosted. He commented on how the people were giving a hard time to the airline employees, and how he wishes to never be at the receiving end of those complaints. His sentence made me think of teaching and all my student interactions. I thought about Grégory calling people and hearing the customers' reaction when he tells them that their parcel is not going to make it on time. Then I thought about Pauline becoming a medical doctor and listening to people's problems as her daily profession. Didn't say anything to Cameron, but I felt like being the complaint department for some was just a part of being a human. I hoped that his wish comes true.

Complaining to a powerless representative 30 to 1 was still unjustifiably inhumane. He would have sent all of us to our houses instead of taking that abuse any day.

Some time passed and as we close down on 2 am, pizza appeared at the gate. Representatives put the pizza in such a way that it looked like we were boarding the flight with our boarding-plates. I focused too much on how they got the pizza in the secure area. Did the TSA ask for a boarding pass of the pizza guy? Did the boxes fit the scanner? We laughed at these things as we enjoyed our lukewarm slices.

After we got the pizza induced morale boost, the expected news of the overnight delay hit the floor. It was 2 am. The pilots were tired of sitting around and they were deemed not safe to fly. We needed a new crew from Atlanta. We were the last flight of the day, no other plane was flying in or out that night. It meant waiting for the morning... Without losing any time another announcement made clear that all hotels in the area were filled. Detroit was a busy town that night.

We sat around, chat with people: mostly heard where they were heading and where they made a mistake in their trips and ended up in Detroit, charged our devices, and tried to pass the time. Time passed, but it wasn't going fast enough. The night was too long and we were waiting for a new flight number scheduled for almost 10 am. The random 4: Pauline, Grégory, Cameron and I decided to walk the entire terminal. We took it slow. There were too many empty gates and closed shops to cherish. We talked about the basics that make us ourselves in the entire hour-long trip. Who we were, what we do, what languages we speak, what mistake(s) lead us to Detroit that night. Later we talked about how people were shy to have conversations with strangers in general... And of course, how playing laser-tag with kids and getting paid for it was a great gig.

A little before 5 am the terminal train started commuting again. The night was coming to an end. Cameron somehow found out that a close by coffee shop was opening at 5:30 am. Our excitement was visible. I claimed the check. It was a thank you to this group. Thanks to these guys, the night passed without me hitting my head on every wall I see in that terminal. I guess it was the Mediterranean, sun-touched skin thing in me. As Grégory named us, "The crew" didn't understand why I wanted to pay but I was able to assert it. I think I remembered the Turkish saying which I can only translate as "a coffee-chat can worth 40 years of memories" and knew I wanted to remember that night.

We were right at the door to see the coffee shop's metal curtains lift up. Walked right in with a child like excitement, started deciding, and ordering. The clerk asked:

“Where are you guys all from?”

Cameron took the lead and started listing. The confused clerk, with lots of laughter mixed into his sentence, asked

“So you guys don’t know each other at all?”

Our laughter confirmed him

“You look close, like you know each other for some ti...”

A lot more laughter.

We took our drinks to the terminal train and started riding it back and forth. On the way to the train, Grégory said “I always thought the city name t-shirts they sell at the airports were unnecessary, but I am really thinking about getting one from Detroit now.” He was right those t-shirts were souvenirs for these type of nights. People were starting to fill the airport, and we still needed to check what happened to our flights. Couple of trips on the train was enough for this tired bunch to get bored. We left and went to our gate. Sun was coming up.

The rest is all about getting boarding passes, arranging new routes for the missed connections. You go talk to a representative and ask for the best, she talks to a representative over the phone and asks for the best, and they... takes time and patience.

We all ended up in the same flight to Amsterdam that we waited all night for, but we didn’t get to sit together. Not that we tried.

The most important thing was that, a senior high-schooler, a medical student, a young adult, and a father of three, all from completely different backgrounds enjoyed the company of each other. We couldn’t have done this on a “normal” day. Out of our comfort zones for a night, we met each other at the basics and saw how we were all OK in our own way. We unexpectedly molded friendships from our one-time misery.

I should have had the night connecting July 30th to 31st, 2016 in my nightmares to come, but instead it will always be a fond memory.

Ali Kemal Uncu
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Figure 1: Awesome Image (Thanks Cameron)