ESSAY

# In Transit

by Chotiya Ahuja



"Division" by Andrei-David Petre

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I had an hour. Emerging out from the jet bridge, I saw the sky darkening with orange and red streaks at the horizon. In the terminal, it was bright and bustling. I paced here and there, looking at the shops and restaurants. I took in the details of the people passing through the airport on their journey: the way they carried themselves, the clothes they wore, the luggage they hauled.

It was already the spring break of my sophomore year in college. But I had hardly seen much of America beyond the walls of my residential campus. Newark airport was as fascinating a place to me as anywhere else. I heard the announcement for the last few passengers of a departing plane. A couple rushed by, and I heard a snippet of their conversation — a few curses. The floor trembled from their footsteps and rolling suitcases.

My father had decided to spend the layover hour on the plane. The two of us were on our way from Boston to Washington D.C. I had stopped by his seat to let him know that I would be going out to stretch my legs. He was reading the flight's copy of *The Economist*, bound in a clunky plastic binder. It was 1994, years before any passenger would be staring at a screen and every cell phone would be turned on upon landing. Three days earlier, my father had arrived from Bangkok to be with me for my two weeks off, and almost instantaneously I felt as though there was clarity to my thoughts again. I didn't know what I missed more, getting to be with my family or simply having conversations in the language I grew up speaking.

At a bookstore, I bought glossy magazines, a drink, and a bag of pretzels. I glanced at my watch, and mentally noted the time that I would have to head back to the gate. No announcement would be made for a layover flight. I found an empty chair in a dining area and settled in. The Academy Awards were coming up so I had picked up an entertainment magazine. Reading about movie stars was easy, unlike the stuttering and stumbling reading I did for my coursework, with a dictionary on hand. In class, I hardly voiced my opinion, partly from having been used to only listening and taking notes. But most of all, I was wary of mispronunciations. Should I pronounce a word with the intonation on the wrong syllable, my thoughts could be incomprehensible. By the way I looked, I might be able to pass as just another American student in the class, but one sentence out of my mouth would blow my cover.

The next time I glanced at my watch, I realized I had completely lost track of time. I was far from athletic, but youth allowed me to sprint at a moment's notice. Soon, I was back at the gate, my heart beating fast. Out of breath, I feared the worst — that the plane had taken off mere minutes earlier. But it hadn't departed yet. I saw the last passenger disappear into the boarding bridge. Soon I would be back on the plane, rejoining my father on our journey.

But I couldn't find my ticket stub.



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Frantically, I searched in every compartment of my backpack and each of my pockets. Nothing. I asked if they could look up the passenger list. My name must be there. A gate agent shook her head. Without a ticket, they couldn't let me on the plane. I was stunned.

"My dad is on the plane," I cried out, and searched for a sympathetic face, but among the airport workers, I found none.

All eyes were on me. If what I said had been the truth, where was my father? Wouldn't he have been searching for me as well? What I had just uttered must have sounded like a complete lie. I lowered my eyes and then, on a whim, made for a dash through to the boarding bridge. Two staff held me back, and I fell to the ground.

I sat up, emptied out the contents of my backpack onto the floor, and searched through my belongings. Finally, I found the ticket stub. It was in the fold of the ticketing envelope, hidden behind the small flap inside. I had no idea how I had missed it earlier. Holding up the little piece of paper, I cried out triumphantly, "Here's the ticket. Here it is!"

My gaze fell upon the gate agent I had talked to earlier. She looked astonished. It was too late. The plane had already taken off, taking my father away from me. I sobbed uncontrollably.

One of the staff led me to the lower level of the terminal. Going down the escalator, I was still sniffing. Besides the few airport workers, the hall was empty. It would be hours before a flight departed from any of the nearby gates. I would be issued a ticket for the next flight to Reagan National.

"Stop crying already," the airport worker blurted out from behind the counter. "It wasn't the last boat to China."

China? I looked up quizzically. What has a boat to China got to do with me or my situation? I had absolutely no idea. What he said sounded off, but I couldn't explain why. I understood every word he said, but I couldn't tell what he meant. I glanced at the other airport worker behind the counter. A Black man. He averted my eye line, and looked down at the screen in front of him.

At Reagan National, my father greeted me with a warm smile. Assuming I had passed by his seat when he was in the restroom, he didn't realize I had been left behind in Newark until his plane landed. Many years were to pass before my father — at another airport in another country — acknowledged how frightened he had been upon learning that I had not been on


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the plane with him that day. As for me, I told him I had missed our flight announcement, and couldn't make it back to the gate in time.



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