

*"The Ahi Affair"*

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I don't know if you've ever had a boring, repetitive job. They can be quite painful. Soul draining, mundane, redundant, full of urgh. If urgh's not a word, it should be: urgh expresses what it is like to do such a job perfectly.

And I should know because I have one.

It's horrid.

Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful for any job that pays the bills- especially these days- there's plenty of people who would kill for even a terrible job. Thankfully, the monkey in the White House will be gone in a couple of years- not that I think that will change anything either. He'll only be replaced by some other monkey.

Anyway, I'm not rich, I'm not even affluent, but my wife and I ain't starving. So that's nice.

But work.

Egads work.

Intellectual stimulation? Nada, nothing, zilch- the big itinerant zippo.

I might as well be dead while I'm at work. I think I'd be happier. I go into work, I shut off my skull and 8 hours later I wake up again and go back to being a human being.

So where is this mindless prison?

I work at the ticket counter at Jet Green at a major international airport in the south that shall remain nameless to protect the innocent- whoever they are and if they even exist. My technical title is "Initial Customer Embarkment Facilitator and Baggage Hold Content Processor."

Sounds fancy doesn't it?

It's not.

My job has always been mindless. People come up to the counter, I rattle off the same list of questions, pretend like I care about why the fat woman has to have an aisle seat, weigh the bags, hand over the boarding pass and repeat. Ad infinitum.

Then 9-11 happened, and what was a barely bearable job slipped down so that my eyes, which had heretofore been just out of the muck, finally slid under. Now, on top of doing these mundane tasks all day, I'm supposed to take them VERY SERIOUSLY.

Three times a year we have to go to what they call "motivational" meetings where they do their level best to convince everyone that every passenger- even the 85 year old woman with white hair and a walker- could really be a terrorist in disguise.

This state of affairs creates a rather difficult to manage dichotomy in the minds of every Initial Customer Embarkment Facilitator. Think about it, not only is every person that comes to my counter a customer- people who we are supposed to satisfy and please- you are also someone we are supposed to distrust, be paranoid about, and probably hate just a little bit.

In reality, everyone is just trying to get to wherever they're going. We are a mobile society- thousands and thousands of people fly daily. Now I'm in no way saying terrorists don't exist- but they are so few and far between that, statistically at least, they don't. Obviously this creates a bit of a disconnect between reality as it is (almost no

terrorists), and the false reality we are constantly told to be afraid of (everyone is a terrorist).

My job used to be tedious, but it was bearable- I would come in, do my eight hours and go home. No longer. Now there are men walking around the airports with machine guns, which to me is crazy- I mean aren't we just providing potential terrorists with superior firepower if they happen to show up and disarm one of the yahoo weekend warrior National Guard guys who carry the weapons and constantly steal donuts from the break room?

It's slippery, scary. Just as a fun experiment- try to go through an entire day without hearing the words 9-11. I dare you. If you want to make it you're going to have to avoid turning on the radio, the TV, searching the internet, or actually talking to another person. Whoever Osama's PR guy is, he's doing a hell of a job, you gotta give those bastards that much at least.

I'm telling you all of this because it only goes to underscore my total shock at what happened at my boring repetitive job today.

Today, I found myself grateful for those weekend warriors with their machine guns. Today, I found myself thinking I was a fool for questioning what I was being told.

Today, a woman came running up to my counter- eyes wild. She had long curly blond hair, blue eyes, she was pretty too- in spite of the fact she was really sweating. Not the typical profile of a terrorist- but from the first second I could tell something wasn't right- I just couldn't put my finger on what it was.

I went through my spiel about who packed the bags and asked for her ID. The woman handed it over. Her name was Victoria. I put the name into the computer and handed the ID back to her.

That was when I got my first concrete example of what was wrong. Her eyes kept flicking downward at her bag. There was nervousness in that look- almost textbook of what the heavy-lidded gentleman that runs the anti-terrorist training says to look for. Prior to 9-11 my first thought would've been that she probably thought the bag was going to go over the weight limit and she'd get hit with an extra fee.

Now it makes me think I'm dealing with a suitcase full of C-4 explosives.

At my prompting Victoria put her bag on the scale.

The bag was a full 20 pounds under the limit. I felt the hair on the back of my neck go up. Something wasn't right, I just knew it. I typed a couple of keystrokes on my computer marking her as a potential problem and tried not to look nervous as I reached down and hoisted her bag onto the conveyor belt that led to the plane.

"Careful." She said when I dropped the bag.

I looked back at the bag and thought I saw something, a hint of white vapor leaking out from between the teeth of the zipper.

I reached down and slapped the emergency stop button on the conveyor belt- it wound down with a plaintive whine. In a room where the National Guard is centered, a number of lights went off and a standard response team was sent out to find discover the cause of the stop.

I stared at the bag and a second wisp of smoke came up from between the teeth, this one thicker. Then a steady stream began to pour up from the bag. The drills they perform with us now clicked into place. I raised my arm and hit a button underneath my counter.

The security, already on their way, tackled the woman to the ground in seconds and held the automatic weapons to her head- which made me feel a bit better, but didn't actually do much to stop the smoking baggage, I found myself in an extended cringe, waiting for what I felt sure would be a terrific explosion.

I'm going to stop right here, because so far- it sounds like I have every right to be terrified right? I'm the one who should be scared.

And I was.

Except, what was happening wasn't actually horrifying at all- or at least it shouldn't have been. Indeed, in retrospect I think it was hilarious.

I think the reason why will become a tad clearer when I tell you the first word that came out of the woman on the floor's mouth.

It was "Tuna."

Are you laughing yet?

No?

Let me explain.

Here's what actually happened.

It turns out Victoria's husband was a bit of a fanatic about a restaurant near St. Petersburg, a little hole in the wall joint called the Thirsty Marlin. Now, for whatever reason, this woman's husband got it into his head that the tuna sandwich served at this particular establishment was heads and tails above anything that could be found anywhere else on earth- it was something about the wasabi mayonnaise I guess.

Anyway, this woman, only married for a little over a year, was going on her first vacation without her husband. She came down to Florida on a trip to see her sister with an old friend who was turning 30 and wanted to do something special for her birthday. They came down, had some laughs, and on the afternoon she was leaving, this young woman decided that she was going to give in to her husband's increasingly desperate pleading that she bring back a sandwich from this particular restaurant.

She didn't want to try because she was afraid that the 5 hours it would take her to get from the restaurant home was too long and the tuna would turn over- causing her husband to get a nasty taste of the food poisoning.

But he'd brought it up during every phone call and every time the subject of Florida came up. She later told the investigating officer that he even brought up the sandwich when he was drinking orange juice- it seems the mere thought "Florida" brought another directly on its heels, "sandwich." So against all of her best instincts, she finally broke down and went to the restaurant. She told the man sitting behind the counter what she wanted to do and after getting through the standard incredulous looks and disbelieving laughter the man went into the back to see if the head cook knew of a safe way to transport the sandwich up to Illinois which is where this lady lived.

They had an idea- dry ice. At which point Victoria's sister Maggie remembered that she actually had a chunk of dry ice at her house that she saved from the delivery of her fertility drugs that had arrived a week earlier. This led to a rushed trip back to the house and then a frenzied return to the restaurant. Of course the dry ice was buried in the back of the freezer and now they were very late- which was why the woman was so nervous, she thought she was going to miss the plane, it turns out her bad luck got worse. Maggie's car got a flat tire a half a mile from the airport. With no alternative Victoria was forced to run with her baggage in tow the final ½ mile.

The day was extremely hot and you know she was cursing her fool husband for making her get the stupid sandwich. She noticed a whiff of the eerie vapor coming from the baggage but she thought it would stop once she got into the air conditioning of the airport. In her mad rush to make it before her plane left she totally forgot about the dry ice melting- and how it would look, until she had the moment to stop at the counter. Yet another reason she felt nervous.

So, instead of having a funny story about a woman and a tuna sandwich I have a moral story about paranoia and fear.

And that, in my humble opinion, is a tragedy.