

# *The Airport*

**Mairi Neil**

The smell of coffee, toasted sandwiches and juice perfumes the air... and my stomach rumbles. Ridiculous! For the last twelve hours I've sat on a plane, where I seem to have done nothing but eat. Now, sitting in the transit area, the aroma from a string of eateries has olfactory glands working overtime.

I'm sitting too, as if tired on a hard, plastic chair not as comfortable as the padded airline seat. Although there's room to move in this corner of the cafe - luxurious to move legs, wriggle my bottom - even spread arms and a newspaper without poking someone in the ribs or eye.

4.00am and Abu Dhabi Airport as busy as Melbourne Central 9.00am Saturday morning. The noise level similar too, except the chattering nearby punctuates the air in at least ten different languages and more fractious toddlers crying — their language universal. There's piped music, ubiquitous and annoying, even with its Arabic flavour and frequent interruptions by announcements in a variety of languages.

Pity the poor cleaners (mainly female), and security (mainly male) who work here all the time. How they must long for peace and quiet. I hope they get some at home. It must be hard work pushing those trolleys loaded with brushes and spray bottles. Daffodil yellow dusters hang from the buckets alongside black garbage bags, and peek from their pockets, a bright contrast to dark maroon uniforms. Probably all foreign workers from India and Pakistan; I've read how they're abused and mistreated after being imported to do jobs locals don't want to do.

I sat here to watch the board change and keep an eye on when my connecting flight lands. The flashing lights of various colours a good idea: landed, boarding, delayed, on time. All colour-coded. Like some people's luggage. What a variety of cases available today, with many matching and others of unique design. A lot of money must be made in the travel accessory business, but I imagine every aspect of the industry extremely competitive with the amount of people travelling.

When did suitcases become so cheap? And so easy to haul around? Most have retractable handles, wheels and some can do a 360 degree turn. Lightweight too — a lifetime of difference to the battered suitcase with dodgy clasps I used in the 70s. It was secondhand too. Borrowed from an aunt and a pale bluey-green. Something borrowed, something blue ... how does the wedding ditty go?

Dad gave me one of his old leather belts to strap around the middle of the case to add another hurdle for potential thieves and to ensure no embarrassing moments at the luggage collection carousel. I'll never forget the anguish on a young woman's face at Singapore Airport in 1973, as the crew and passengers of a jumbo jet waiting at the

luggage carousel watched her underwear dangle from, and cling to other baggage, in a trail following her burst suitcase.

My sister heartbroken too after an organised gang of thieves among the baggage handlers at Heathrow slit open her cases and stole precious jewellery and souvenirs. The perils of travelling...

I watch a group of black-garbed women in flowing *nigabs* organise children and cases and follow their white-robed menfolk in *thobes* and red *gutras*. Saudis heading home from holidays perhaps, the men joking with each other, the women inscrutable behind gowns that only reveal demure eyes.

A gaggle of European teenage girls in jeans and t-shirts shake on their backpacks and struggle towards another exit. They have spent the time in transit glued to mobile phones or tuned into iPods; two digital devices no self-respecting modern young travellers would be without. I smile and look at my mobile and notepad on the table and scratch the descriptive 'young' from the previous sentence!

Flights are leaving but new arrivals fill the spaces of departing passengers. I glance at my watch - an hour or more, to kill. A woman nearby munches on raisin toast and the aroma of fresh coffee tickles my nostrils - I succumb!

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