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Playbook

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PLAYBOOK

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English Department
The University of Mississippi

by

Jason Harrington

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ABSTRACT

From 2007 to 2013 I worked for the Transportation Security Administration. It was a Kafkaesque experience, rife with bureaucratic absurdity. This memoir is a chronicle of that experience, from the days leading up to my initial application, to the days following my letter of resignation. It is also the story of a man dealing with personal demons, and struggling to find his way through the morass of modern society

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PLAYBOOK

CHAPTER ONE FEAR OF A RED TEAM

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—Some shit I never paid much mind

TERMINAL 5 was my first real checkpoint assignment after being hired by the TSA in 2007. T5 stands isolated from the rest of O'Hare. After stepping off the airport tram, fighting your way through a flood of passengers, and balancing your luggage on the escalator, you come to the main floor. Past the various international airline ticket counters you go—British Airways, Air India, Royal Jordanian, Aer Lingus. The flags of dozens of nations line both sides of the corridor, hung overhead. The hall could almost pass for a grand one, if the space weren't usually packed

with a huddled mass of tired and confused international passengers, all hot and sweaty due to O'Hare's chronic climate control problems.

As the hellish wait-line crawls past the food court that sits off to the side, the first tangible TSA presence appears, the beginning of the security routine: anywhere from one to four agents seated at podiums, checking boarding passes.

That's where I was the day the Vietnam vet came through, the ticket checking position, matching up people's boarding passes with the information on their licenses and passports, running my light and loupe over DMV photos. A guy from one of the disability service companies wheeled the vet up to me for the document check. When people in wheelchairs traveled alone, they usually arranged in advance for someone from one of the traveler assistance companies to help them pass through security. The Dis Ab employees were mostly kids, teenagers from Eastern Europe whose families had relocated to the North and Northwest sides of Chicago. They wore valet uniforms—green vests and black pants. The guy who wheeled the Vietnam vet up to me was a Polish kid named Konrad who liked to make fun of passengers behind their backs.

“Here is the gentlemen's ticket,” Konrad said, handing me the guy's boarding pass. “And passport.” Konrad winked as he handed the documents over, signaling me that this was going to be interesting.

“Just hurry the shit up,” the vet said. “I've been waiting at this goddamned airport for 3 hours now.”

One of the few advantages International Terminal 5 had over all the Terminals was that foreign travelers tended to be more docile than in domestic. Officer Marco taught me that. No matter how many absurd security measures you laid on a group of travelers from Myanmar, for instance, they seemed to be happy enough that they were allowed to get on the plane at the end of the security procedures without being thrown in an interrogation room. The fact that we didn't carry guns made us a relatively pleasant airport security force for a lot of foreign travelers, and many people were just so plain confused by U.S. airport security that they didn't know what to make of us. But maybe 10 percent of the passenger traffic you saw in Terminal 5 was made up of Americans, so you did get the occasional blast of anger and righteous indignation.

I passed my ultraviolet penlight over the vet's passport to make sure its watermarks fluoresced, checked his name and information against the ticket. Born in the early 1950s. A tall guy, 6'3. He was flying Malaysia Airways, Ho Chi Minh stamped as his final destination. Not at all unusual: you often saw Vietnam vets flying back to Nam for various reasons, often having to do with female friends they'd found over there at some point.

"You should just take me straight to the fucking plane, you know that?" the vet said.

He had stubbly cheeks and a pony tail flowing out the back of his baseball cap. He pinched me with his eyes.

"Straight to the plane," he said. "None of this bullshit 'security.' And you know why? Because I actually served my country. I did more than sign up to be a little airport cop with a cushy bureaucratic job, pretending to serve. You see what I sacrificed," he said, nodding to his

limp legs. “And after all of it, I still have to be hassled by you people, calling yourselves security officers. You don’t secure shit,” he said. “You’re just pains in the ass. You’re tearing down what I fought for.”

“Thank you, sir,” I said, handing the ticket and the passport back to Konrad, who in turn handed it to the vet. Konrad smiled, tried not to laugh. Rolled his toxic charge up to the front of the security line.

I didn’t know how to deal with angry war vets at that early point in my TSA career. Eventually I would come to realize that the best way to approach angry vets was to let them know I agreed with them: I was indeed holding down a poor excuse for a national security job, and I wasn’t doing shit next to what he or she had done for America.

“What was that all about?” asked Big Ted, my supervisor, who was standing behind me. How long he had been there I didn’t know. He always came up quietly like that, which could make one a little uneasy working on his watch. But aside from his unnerving stealth, Big Ted was one of the few TSA supervisors I could tolerate. He was a middle-aged white dude who played in a band on weekends and was part of the unofficial faction of TSA employees who thought the security measures being sent down from D.C. were ridiculous and to be ignored as often as possible.

“He’s just pissed. He hates airport security,” I said.

“They all are. They all do,” Ted said.

“But he’s a vet,” I said.

“Shit.”

War vets were the angry passengers most feared by TSA agents. With the average furious American passenger, the argument came down to this, nine times out of ten:

Passenger: What sense do these rules make? Tell me right now. These rules are fucking stupid, and you know it.

TSA Agent: These security rules are in place for your protection, for the safety of America. If you don't like it, I'm not the one to argue with. Write your congressperson.

But vets held a trump card they could play if they wanted to, and many did: Don't You Tell Me About the Safety of America; I Almost Died Fighting for this Country in a War on Behalf of Your Little Snot-Nosed Ass, and I've Been Writing My Congressman About the Benefits I *Haven't* Been Receiving Since the End of that War for Years. Now Give Me Back My Fucking Bottled Water, Asshole.

"You can go back to the checkpoint now. You've been out here for a while now," Ted said, referring to the amount of time I'd spent out on the ticket checking position. We were only supposed to be on any given TSA position for 30 minutes, max, but agents often got stranded. I had been on ticket checking for nearly an hour, but I was happy there right at that moment: you at least got to sit down on the ticket checking position and rest your feet. I was hungover that day and really didn't like the idea of standing guard at a walk-thru metal detector, or running from lane to lane, patting people down in a sunlight-flooded terminal with broken air conditioning.

"Been out here a while, but I'm fine."

“No, go ahead inside, I’ll take over here.”

“Shouldn’t you be in there, in case the vet gets pissed during his pat-down?” I asked.

“They’re gonna’ have to give him a full-body pat-down. You know he won’t be happy about it.”

“That’s exactly why I *don’t* want to be in there,” Ted said.

And so Supervisor Ted kicked me off the ticket checking podium, sending me back to the main checkpoint area, past a knot of passengers standing in line. I always felt a mixture of pride and pity, walking past hundreds of passengers waiting in line to get to the secure side of an airport checkpoint—strolling right up to the swinging ADA (Americans with Disabilities) gate right next to whichever TSA agent was standing at the walk-thru metal detector post, showing my federal badge, and getting ushered right in without even a second look.

I was grateful to be in the same terminal as two people who had been in my training class: a teenage girl named Vivian and a bright-eyed kid named Vasquez.

Vasquez was on the lane with me the day the vet came through, along with another TSA agent named Julie, who was seated in front of the Rapiscan control panel, running the carry-on luggage x-ray machine. Vasquez was a loyal TSA employee, a good-looking kid, half-Hispanic half-white with frost-tipped hair. He looked like a boy band member shrink-wrapped in a Transportation Security Administration uniform. Julie was about my age, mid-twenties, always chomping on gum. She had big blue eyes and a good sense of humor. But Julie was ferocious when angry. Everyone on the checkpoint was either scared of Julie or allied with her. When the agent standing at the walk-thru metal detector shouted “Male assist at the gate,” it was Vasquez who answered the call to handle the situation.

“I got this,” Vasquez said, heading toward the ADA gate, where the vet was. As Vasquez greeted the vet to give him the pat-down advisement, the vet cursed at Vasquez, loud enough for Julie and me to hear it, ten feet away.

“Sounds like *that's* gonna' be fun,” Julie said. “Well, at least the guy can't get up in Vasquez's face.” She laughed a little as she ran the x-ray machine. (On-screen, people's luggage looked like pixelated collages of green, orange and black blobs.) Another barrage of curses from the vet floated over to Julie and me as Vasquez guided him into the roped-off area where we gave people pat-downs.

“Actually, maybe that guy *is* going to manage to off Vasquez. He probably has killer upper body strength,” Julie said, turning toward me and away from the x-ray screen. Julie was wearing a pink bra that showed through her white federal-issue shirt, a violation of uniform policy that several managers had warned her about, mostly as a way to flirt with her.

Just as I was thinking about how lucky I was to have Vasquez on the lane with me, always willing, as he was, to deal with tough passengers such as the Vietnam vet, another male passenger showed up at the ADA gate.

“Male assist at the gate!” the agent manning the metal detector shouted again. I was the only male officer left on the lane; I had no choice but to do my duty as a TSA agent, which never boded well.

“What's the deal with him?” I asked the agent standing guard at the metal detector, motioning to the forty-something white man in khaki shorts and Polo shirt standing at the gate.

“Pacemaker,” the agent said.

Passengers with pacemakers couldn't walk through the metal detector, since the magnetic field could interfere with the device and cardiac arrest them on the spot. So pacemaker passengers almost always stopped short of the metal detector, showed a med card to the agent standing there, and asked to be patted down.

"I'm gonna' be giving you a pat-down," I said to Pacemaker, launching into the standard spiel. "Did you send all your luggage through the x-ray machine? Is everything out of your pockets?"

"Yeah yeah yeah. But my son's over there, on the other side, so let's just hurry this up."

At that point there were two pat-downs going simultaneously on our lane, which meant that Vasquez and I were right next to each other in the roped-off area, both dealing with our respective passengers. Vasquez had his furious Vietnam vet in the wheelchair, and I had my unhappy dad with a heart condition. We struggled to deliver our required monologues.

"Okay, sir," I said to my passenger, "I'm going to be touching you all over, from your head to the bottom of your feet. When I get to your chest area I'll be sure to be careful with your pacemaker—"

"I know, I know. I fly all the time. Just hurry this up."

". . . Are you able to stand at all sir, or at least lift yourself up from the wheelchair so I can pat down your buttocks?" Vasquez asked the vet.

"Of course I *can't* fucking stand," the vet cut him off, "Do you see this wheelchair? If I could stand, don't you think I'd do away with the goddamned wheelchair?"

"Sir, there's no need for that kind of language," Vasquez said.

“Why don’t you try actually *doing* something for your country instead of hassling people, and then tell me there’s no reason for my goddamned language,” the vet said.

“He has a point,” my passenger said as I patted the collar of his Polo. “All you guys do is hassle people.”

It was a duet of discontent, and I was beginning to lose my cool.

“Do I look like a goddamned terrorist threat to you?” the vet asked, both arms raised and spread like a chair-bound Christ, holding his wallet in one hand, as Vasquez started in on his pat-down. “It looks to me like there are a lot of other people coming through this checkpoint—people who aren’t even U.S. citizens—who you should be more interested in,” the vet said.

“You’re picking on a war hero? Am I actually witnessing this?” my passenger asked, looking over to Vasquez and the vet. He then squinted toward the end of the conveyor belt, where the passengers picked up their luggage. “Jimmy, come over here,” he said.

The guy’s kid—10 or 11-years-old in sweatpants, sweatshirt and socks—came padding over to the pat-down area, ducked beneath the rope to get to his dad.

“Whoa whoa whoa,” Vasquez and I shouted at almost the same time. I took a step toward the man’s son, my palm held out like a stop sign. “You can’t come in here, sir,” I said. Then, remembering he was just a kid, I turned back to Dad. “He can’t come in here, sir. You can’t have contact with him or anyone until after your pat-down is complete.”

“Dad?” the boy said, unsure of how to deal with the conflicting orders—his father beckoning, and me repelling.

“Listen to the man, Jimmy. Back off. We can’t be together right now, because I might be a terrorist. This is what’s called a *burgeoning police state*, Jimmy. And it wasn’t always like this. You just got lucky: you were born right into it.”

“Oh for *fuck’s sake*,” the vet said. “Let the man be with his goddamned son.”

“Sir, I have to pat-down your buttocks,” Vasquez told the vet. “I’m going to have to get another officer to lift you off the chair so I can get to that area.”

“You’re not having anyone lift me up off this goddamned chair,” the vet said. “And you’re not touching my ass.”

“Are you watching what’s happening in here, Jimmy?” my passenger shouted to his son, “This is a man who fought for our country being molested by the government.”

“I don’t think my PlayStation came out of the x-ray machine, Dad,” the boy responded.

“There are bigger things to worry about than the goddamned PlayStation, Jimmy.”

Now Julie, watching from the x-ray machine, started laughing.

“What the hell are you guys doing to those poor passengers?” she shouted.

“You’re free to go, sir,” I said to my passenger after sliding my hands along the bottom of his feet, the final touch of the pat-down procedure back in those days.

“Jason! You patted his feet down wrong!” Julie shouted. “You used a sliding motion! It’s supposed to be a patting motion!”

God I hated Julie sometimes.

“I’m not going anywhere until this guy’s free to go, too,” my passenger said, pointing to the vet.

Vasquez pulled me off to the side for TSA talk.

“Hey, whaddya’ think? Will you help me lift him off the chair so I can pat down his ass?”

“I don’t think he’s going to permit himself to be lifted,” I whispered.

“But I have to pat down the buttocks,” Vasquez said.

“Just pat the bottom of the wheelchair, feel the buttocks through the seat. Good enough.

Let’s just get these two the fuck outta here,” I said.

“That’s an SOP violation,” Vasquez said. “We have to properly clear the buttocks.”

A boarding call crackled over the airport PA system.

“I’m gonna’ miss my goddamned plane,” the vet said.

“Fuck the SOP,” I said. “Bottom of the seat and call it a day.”

“If he misses his plane, I miss my plane, too. I’m not leaving this man behind,” my passenger said.

“Finally, a real patriot,” the vet said.

“Maybe I should call for the supervisor,” Vasquez said. “It’s a security breach if I let him go without the ass-pat.”

“Just pat under the chair,” I said. “For Christ’s sake.”

Vasquez was always so goddamned by the book. It annoyed the hell out of me. Big Ted would probably say the same thing anyway, even if Vasquez did call him over to confer. When dealing with a paralyzed war hero in full public view, it was probably best to avoid lifting him up and groping his ass as he loudly protested. Vasquez lingered in front of the vet for a few

moments, considering what to do, before finally bending down, patting the underside of the chair's seat, and straightening back up.

"OK. You can go, sir," Vasquez said.

"God bless America," my passenger said.

But the vet didn't move to roll himself out of the corral.

"You're sure I can go now, *officer?*" the vet asked.

"You're good to go," I put in for Vasquez. "*Everyone is free to go,*" I announced to the checkpoint in general, proud that my good sense had carried us all through.

"That's great." my passenger said. "But you know you both just missed a test, right?"

I turned around, thinking it was some sort of joke. The federal badge was already out of my passenger's wallet. A DHS badge, just like mine. The little boy was smiling big, just on the other side of the ropes. The kid was in on it.

When I turned back to the vet, he was already standing to his full height of 6'3, his rear turned to Vasquez for inspection. A thin layer of orange plastic was taped to his ass. Sealed inside the plastic was a gelatinous substance.

"14 grams of simulation Semtex," the "vet" said, in a new voice—the *I Love the Smell of Napalm in the Morning* grit was gone. "Enough to bring down that plane." Now he was pulling his federal badge out of his wallet, too. "Call your supervisor. We have to have a little talk."

Thirty minutes later, Vasquez, Julie and I all sat in the TSA manager's office. It was up in the mezzanine, on the second floor, which gave our superiors a guard tower view. This

sometimes made working T5 a real nightmare, especially when you had an evil manger up there. Luckily, the manager that day was Rolanda, a Puerto Rican woman in her early 40s. Relatively reasonable.

“I watched that whole thing on video,” Rolanda said after making us sweat for a couple minutes while she shuffled some papers around in a manila folder. She then spent nearly half-a-minute straightening her tie, for good measure. Managers didn’t have to wear any sort of TSA uniform. In fact, business attire was encouraged for them, and they tried to out-do each other in a sort of federal fashion war. Rolanda wore a checkered silk shirt along with the tie. Probably designer. She styled her hair short, and rocked a suit better than all the males. She’d taken off her blazer at that point; our test failure had probably made her too heated for the blazer. “I don’t think I have to tell you that you guys fucked everything up down there,” she said, finally.

“I fucked something up?” Julie said.

“Watch the language,” Rolanda said.

“Well, don’t tell me *I* messed something up when it was these two *idiots* who failed the test,” Julie said, waving toward Vasquez and me.

“Julie,” Rolanda said. “Stop. You were talking on the x-ray just before the second guy came through. Talking to Harrington. You know I can write you up for that. In fact, I have to.”

At this, Julie leaned back in her chair and shot me a look that said she’d never talk to me again. She couldn’t argue with Rolanda’s take on the video. Everything on the checkpoint was recorded by dozens of closed circuit cameras covering nearly every inch of the airport. The nerve center of any given airport was TSOC, the Transportation Security Operations Center, the room

where all the most sensitive checkpoint security business was handled. TSOC was the room where the valuables that passengers left behind were brought, the room that received first reports of any weapons discovered on the checkpoint, the room where a big-screen monitor was divided into 32 tiny pictures of constantly changing video feeds—the people up in TSOC could zoom in on any area of any checkpoint in the airport and roll the footage back to any moment requested by a supervisor or manager.

“Well *I'm* not the one who let explosives slip past me, like Vasquez.”

“I knew something was wrong with that guy,” Vasquez said, slouched in his seat, arms crossed. He hadn’t even looked any of us in the eye since we’d gotten in the room; he was thousand-yard-stare angry. “I knew it.”

Of course, what Vasquez was leaving out here was, *But Harrington made me hurry and let the Vietnam vet go*. It was all silly, as far as I was concerned, because the test wasn’t at all realistic, as usual: what terrorist would bother risking such a small amount of explosives taped to the ass? If someone were really determined to go for it, he or she would go one little step further and slip the explosives up inside a body cavity, where none of our security measures could yet reach. The real problem was that I, along with Vasquez, had only been with the TSA for a little over a year at that point. The probationary period lasted 2 years at the TSA. Until an employee reached the 2-year mark, he or she could be let go for virtually any infraction.

“Harrington? What do you have to say about all this?” Rolanda said.

I wasted no time in trying to absolve myself.

“What? I didn’t miss anything, did I? The guy I patted down didn’t have anything on him, right?” I’d been waiting to ask that question for over 30 minutes.

“No. But the testers told me what went on down there. They told me you pressured Vasquez into loosening the security measures.”

“So the kid was in on it too, right?” I said. I’d been sure the guy I was patting down couldn’t be a tester, since he had what was supposedly his kid with him.

“Harrington and Vasquez are always doing things wrong,” Julie chimed in.

“Julie, *please*. But yes, it does appear that way. What was that with the guy’s foot, Harrington?”

“*Told you,*” Julie said. “You *pat* the bottom of the foot with your hand. You don’t *slide*.”

“It’s not the sliding I care about. Pat, slide: whether you pat or slide, as long as you clear the bottom of the foot, that’s all I care about. The problem was that you slid your hand along the bottom of his foot *horizontally*, Harrington.”

“Yeah, Harrington, *that* too,” Julie said. “You do the bottom of the feet wrong in every way. How many times have you heard in training that it’s a damn hot dog-wise patting motion not a hamburger-wise patting motion on the bottom of the foot?”

“Julie, *shut up*,” Rolanda said, smiling despite herself. Somehow, Julie managed to enter into a mischievous-but-lovable-daughter relationship with all TSA authority figures, so that no matter what she did or said, it was always *Aw, Julie. You crazy kid*. It didn’t seem as though Julie would ever be in any real trouble with TSA management.

“Look. I’m writing you all up, and you guys are de-certified.”

“Oh *hell* no you’re not writing me up because of these two morons.”

“*I’m not decertifying you, Julie.* I’m just giving you a warning write-up. The *guys* are getting letters of reprimands and losing certification for a while. And another thing. In running the footage back, the managers came upon what looked to be a group of male officers singing and laughing on the checkpoint two days ago. Harrington?”

“Vivian’s birthday. Supervisor Ted joined in too.”

TSO Vivian had turned 18 the week before, and all the guys saw it as cause for checkpoint-wide celebration.

“We already talked to Ted about it. The point is there’s no singing ‘Happy Birthday’ while on-duty. We have terrorists out there looking to take down planes. They see a group of people singing ‘Happy Birthday’ and they think, ‘*Those* are the people to slip a bomb past. Right there.’ You’re lucky you didn’t pull that with the testers around. Do you realize how serious it is when you miss a Red Team test? It doesn’t just mean you’re compromising national security. It means the Federal Security Director of this airport looks bad. And when that happens, people get fired. You guys are lucky: this is the first federal test we’ve missed in a while, so you’re not gonna’ lose your jobs this time. But this is on your records. And if either of you ever misses one of those again...”

She didn’t even finish the sentence. Vasquez finished it for her, finally looking Rolanda in the eye.

“We’re fired,” Vasquez said. “Well, I’ll tell you what I’ve learned from all this: I’m making every passenger in a wheelchair stand up from now on. “

Back on the checkpoint, Vasquez and I carried Letters of Reprimand in our pockets for the rest of the day, Vasquez's LOR folded at least four times and tucked inside his wallet and mine folded however many times was necessary to get it to the same size as my cigarette pack. Throughout my federal career I generally lost disciplinary documents within a week of receiving them. Sometimes I threw them away as soon as I got home, not wanting to think about the crush of my government job. I laughed about them over beers with my middle-aged roommates, relaying the bureaucratese with slurry dramatic deliveries. The Letter of Reprimand was the most feared piece of regularly issued TSA paperwork. Only the rarely seen Notice of Suspension write-up was more reviled, along with, of course, the Employment Separation Proposal (although the ESP was like the White Light at the End of a Tunnel in that few people ever returned to the checkpoint to relay the specifics of dealing with an ESP). The Letter of Reprimand basically made clear to the TSA employee that he or she was in some serious shit. The official D.C. Red Team test we missed was the kind the media sometimes got word of, resulting in headlines such as "Studies Show TSA Agents Miss 95% of Security Tests: Is the Airport Any Safer After 9/11?" Missing one of those meant you were definitely on management's radar. If Vasquez or I got another LOR within the next several months or so, it could lead to an ESP. Vasquez and I were one wrong move away from being ex-federal employees.

"I'm patting down every ass," Vasquez said toward the end of our shift. He was eating a Happy Meal, in keeping with his childish eating habits. Vasquez took special pride in a portable candy collection he carried around in his Nike backpack. The candy backpack was perhaps the

most disconcerting feature in the assemblage of strange personal facts and characteristics that made Vasquez a surreal picture of a TSA officer: a Justin Bieber lookalike with a backpack full of jelly beans and lemon drops, running around O'Hare airport in a federal uniform barking SOP-related commands over a walkie-talkie.

"I'm done messing around. Fuck these testers," Vasquez continued, nibbling on a fry. The break room was just a couple tables, a computer in the corner for online learning purposes, and some government-issue posters on the wall, including the obligatory printed reminder that if One Sees Something, One Should Say Something, the poster's letters floating above a pair of blue eyes focused on a black silhouette with a backpack.

"I'm patting down feet with a vertical motion from now on," I said, trying to cheer the kid up. "That's what I did wrong. My LOR is about the feet."

"I can't believe you messed that up," Vasquez said, straining his frost-tipped hair through his hands, as though my foot-patting technique was going to make him lose it prematurely. "You've got to get it together. We've all got to get our shit together from now on. And management's not done running back that footage. Other managers will want to look at it. I don't care if a passenger says she's on her way to chemo. No more exceptions."

Of all the things I hated about dealing with the public, the worst part was stretching sick passengers over the security rack. I was taking a drawing class as an elective at the time, so I used to sit down with pencil and pad at gate M7 during break, incognito in my reversible coat, Sox hat pulled low, trying to refashion the scene by sketching passengers coming through 10.

Watch long enough and you'll see people on their death chairs being processed through a checkpoint. The SOP required all headwear to be patted down, and so that's what I sketched: blue-gloved hands kneading tie-dyed bandanas and silk head scarves with paisley appliques. Eyebrows and eyelashes left un-penciled. That was the detail that most surprised me: somehow I didn't think the eyelashes went too. You felt like you were wasting a different kind of time with those pat-downs. Chiaroscuros with Middle Eastern families in the foreground. I spent days trying to nail the shading on the robes. We put them in what we called the corral, a Plexiglas enclosure for passengers who automatically got our enhanced screening based on Middle Eastern points of origin. In one I had the flow of a burqa intertwined with her husband's dishdasha. In another I focused on the negative space between a Muslim family and the others in the queue. Marines flying out on deployment orders: SOP strictly prohibited touching their deployment papers—thick brown envelopes with red wax seals. A Marine was not to allow deployment orders to be separated from his or her person under any circumstances. Most were making their way to the Persian Gulf then. They all called me sir, the soldiers. Where most of the civilian passengers hated us, the military people called you sir and ma'am without exception, no matter what absurd TSA rule you threw in their face.

I'm sorry, Sergeant, but you can't bring those nail clippers on the plane, in the name of national security.

Understood, sir.

I hated when they called me sir. I would have rather they spat on me. The worst part about it was we made them remove their boots. Everyone had to remove their footwear, military

was no exception. And so that's what I drew: lines of young Marines in olive drab socks clutching deployment orders, awaiting the wave-through from federal officers.

By that time, a little over a year into my employment, I had learned that the only way to survive a soul-crushing TSA day was to find art in the job whenever possible. All the things that made TSA employee morale rank among the lowest in the federal government—the low pay and constant covert testing, the pedantic co-workers and supervisors, the furious passengers on the verge of missing their flights— had to be sublimated in order to make the uniform tolerable in the morning. Back in Terminal 1, Officer Marco taught me how to use the uniform to flirt with female passengers. But in T5 there were long passenger lulls, so my trick was to go numb and let my mind wander. I created an imaginary TSA art exhibit, a collection of conceptual pieces, composed entirely of confiscated passenger booty smuggled home from the airport over the course of a year.

You could get humor and fun out of airport security if you closed your eyes, went to a happy place, and ignored the fact your job was airport security. But the thing that made it impossible to find peace for more than a few minutes at a time was the anxiety of being on-camera with a gang of tyrannical managers potentially watching. And Vasquez's observation that other higher-ups would soon be in on our fuck-up was a good and disturbing point: a Red Team failure wasn't the sort of thing you heard about just once. Our little performance back there would be used for playback purposes—*The Anatomy of a Failure*—the details relayed in anecdotal asides to incoming training classes. *This is how you don't operate as a TSA screener,*

ladies and gentlemen. That tête-à-tête with Rolanda was probably just the first of several forthcoming meetings with managers.

After the test failure, I spent the rest of the day doing the only thing I was allowed to do after being decertified: sitting on the exit lane, making sure non-security personnel didn't walk past me into the secure side of the terminal, and giving the bad news to passengers who had gone through security and then accidentally wandered back out. Languishing there at the exit lane podium gave me plenty of time to agonize over the thought of management's impending screening of the footage. I began strategizing for what would come next.

Two things would definitely happen: I would continue to be prohibited from performing any of the official TSO duties for a while, and there would be a recurring lecture at briefing for at least a week On the Importance of Not Allowing Passengers to Pressure You into Speeding up the Screening Process. Best case scenario, Manager Marty would view the video of my Red Team failure and only rewind the footage to analyze my part in the debacle. He would then chew my ass out, give me a letter of counseling and leave it at that. Worst case scenario, Marty would run the Eye in the Sky video back further. He would try to catch me violating SOP in other recent interactions with passengers. He would want to see if I goofed around with my co-workers on the checkpoint, or, for that matter, whether or not I was even *on* the checkpoint when I was scheduled to be. If he held the rewind button down long enough he would be sure to notice that Officer Harrington rolled through the day with zero regard for the TSA Standard Operating Procedure. The Federal Security Director of O'Hare would personally fire me, no doubt. Tripping the attention wire of the Eye in the Sky in such a way as to trigger analysis was the

thing every TSA officer wanted most desperately to avoid. But tripping that wire *over the course of a Red Team failure* was like a royal shit-flush in the game of airport security. The cameras hovered over us like something out of Greek mythology. Argus Panoptes—a 100-eyed federal watchman up in the operations center, always half-awake.

But as far as anyone knew there were no cameras in the room where the managers watched the surveillance footage, so of course the managers themselves were up to no good. We floor-level employees eventually came to learn that some of the managers abused *their* authority when watching CCTV footage. Over at my last checkpoint assignment in United Terminal rumors had recently made the rounds of a cabal of managers behind closed doors indulging in a perv-circle around footage of Britney Spears going through the security routine. Her designer jacket comes off, a scoop of cleavage appears, she bends down to take off her shoes, gets mysteriously pulled aside for a pat-down from a female screener—*wait a minute, was that officer down there violating SOP in pulling her aside for that pat-down? Run that footage back*—and the next thing you know a gang of male managers is up there in front of the security monitor, drooling at the officer-on-Spears action.

The good thing was that the sheer volume of footage precluded the possibility of anyone watching *everything* any one officer was doing, or even a fraction of what all of us were doing. But the fact that any given section of the footage *could* be analyzed, if the managers thought of a reason to look, was enough to keep us on edge. It was like being told as a child that God can look in on anything you do at any time, even when you masturbate. But what I didn't know then, sitting there on the exit lane, feeling chastened by Rolanda's lecture and terrified that

I would soon get walking papers via Marty, was that the managers who threw down write-ups like thunderbolts had more to feel guilty about than I ever would.

As any security agency employee will tell you, the thing about surveillance powers and the people who play God with them is that it turns out God secretly masturbates, too.

CHAPTER TWO **THE BOY CAN DO NO WRONG**

I HAD FLOWN into O'Hare two years earlier, in November of 2006. I was back in my hometown after a stint in Florida, where I'd spent my mid-twenties kicking around from job to job. I don't remember dealing with the TSA flying out from Lauderdale, or into O'Hare, but I do recall shivering as I walked down the jet bridge, cursing the Chicago cold slipping through the cracks of the accordion canopy. The in-flight Bloody Mary was the last drink I would ever take in my life, I told myself for the 98th time. My world had always been circumscribed by drugs and alcohol. Before leaving Illinois I'd been drinking to blackout every night, on top of tapping the kilos of cocaine I'd been delivering from Chicago to the suburbs for my childhood friend and fellow dealer, J.T. I'd also been popping a lot of pills: Percocet, OxyContin. All my friends were either hooked on drugs, selling them in mass quantity, homeless, in prison, dead or soon to be. In 2004, just before moving to Florida, I came to one evening from a morphine and cocaine binge in my Chicago apartment, vomit puddled next to my pillow. Herb, my roommate at the time, told

me I'd been out cold for nearly 24-hours; he had assumed I wasn't going to wake up, but—and he appeared genuinely anguished about this—he couldn't call an ambulance for me.

“An ambulance would mean cops,” he explained, lowering his head to snort another line from the coke-dusted coffee table.

In Sebring, Florida, I worked menial labor jobs—a roofing gig here, a tow-truck company there, the obligatory small-town stint at Walmart. I battled Paleozoic insects, freak rain storms and 3 hurricanes, but the battle with drugs was finally over, I thought; my network of connections was 2,000 miles away. I had no choice but to lay off the pills and coke. By the age of 25, I had proudly whittled my block of substance abuse problems down to what I considered a splinter: a wholesome, good old American alcohol problem. I drank a 12 pack every night, minimum. I loved the fact that I could garnish my drinks with citrus slices fresh from my neighbors' trees.

My father brought my Florida period to an end. He had left Jim Crow Mississippi in 1950 at the age of 14. His mother had been shot dead by a jealous woman three years earlier, in '47, a case of black-on-black crime that the sheriff of Macon, Mississippi didn't think worthy of investigation. His father had been gone long before that—an itinerant lumber worker, picking up jobs wherever he could. He was left to his grandmother, whose advice to my father was to get out of the South. And so he moved to Chicago, where a black boy was free to find his way in the world, only to have his son, 50 years later, move back to the South and get lost in the bottom of a bottle. He called and begged me to move back to Chicago and re-enroll in the college I'd dropped out of. I could move in with him, if need be. So I took him up on the offer, hopped a plane out of

Fort Lauderdale, and found myself back in the Windy City, determined to straighten out once and for all. Get a college degree, maybe a good job.

The first thing I did was head to the South Side to pay a visit to my old drinking buddy, Trey. I stood at the 79th Street Chicago Red Line station, the rumble-rattle of the El I'd just stepped off fading in the distance. As always, Trey was late, so it was just me out on Racine Avenue, alongside a man with a backpack hawking bootleg DVDs. Trey had never owned a cellphone, and his landline was always disconnected, so meeting him involved a series of phone calls from public places over the course of a few days. I usually ended up waiting in the middle of the ghetto for up to 2 hours, wondering if I should abandon the rendezvous point. That day I got lucky: it wasn't long before I saw the stocky, warrior-dwarf gait of Trey approaching in the distance, wearing baggy jeans and a baseball hat cocked to the left, his Ghetto Scowl of Self Preservation melting to a barely contained smile as he drew nearer.

We sat on his grandmother's front stoop. Trey swigged tequila and beer; I pretended I didn't want to join him. One thing about Trey was that, though he had lived most of his life amid socioeconomic circles where lucrative job opportunities usually involved firearms and triple beam scales, he was better than the rest of my friends when it came to knowledge of legitimate job opportunities. He rarely ever made use of those opportunities, it was true, opting instead to work the street selling loose cigarettes and nickel or dime bags of weed to get by, but still, he always knew of the existence of a lot of legit gigs. I didn't want to live with my father indefinitely, so I was open to any advice.

“You could apply to this job I did for a minute last year. RGIS. Doing inventory.”

It was a decent job, Trey claimed, despite the \$7.25 an hour. Every job Trey had a line on paid shitty, anyway. All you had to do was fill out an application, and RGIS inventory would hire you within a week and tell you where to be and when. And so the next day I picked up an application form from RGIS headquarters on the North Side, right down the street from O'Hare. The cover of the information packet was a fine specimen of corporate diversity propaganda, featuring what was, I thought at first, a token black person smiling in a varicolored group of employees wearing the official RGIS uniform. But I would come to find out that in this case the white guy was actually the glaring token: when I reported for work my first day, every single one of my co-workers was black, except the white operations manager who oversaw us.

I tried hard not to allow certain analogies to surface in my mind during my time at RGIS. But when I found I was one of two dozen black people head-counted by a white man in a parking lot one dreary morning before being ushered into a van, it was hard not to mentally draw comparisons. Of all the depressing jobs I've had in my life, this was by far the bleakest. First, the job required us to be at the meet-points at 4 in the morning, and, since I didn't have a car, and since public transportation wasn't running that early in Skokie, I had to call taxis to take me to the parking lots of various fast food joints. A quarter of my paychecks went to Yellow Cab. The vans then carried us to retail stores around the city where our bosses loosed us into the aisles to pick every single item in the store off the shelves for inventory count. If there had been a single white person among the dozens of people climbing into those 4 A.M. work vans—even just a single non-African-American, really; throw me a Filipino or Honduran—I wouldn't have felt as though I had entered some sort of strange, alternate techno-chattel universe. Once on the clock, I,

along with my co-workers, spent 6-10 hours zapping merchandise with RM-1 barcode scanners hung from work belts and sashes. A whole row of us on our knees—dozens of black faces lost in a sort of dreamy concentration, trying to tune in on anything but the task at hand—working through all the items on the lower shelves of, say, the sanitary products aisle at a Walgreens.

My first day was at a Filene's Basement on the North Side which, to a person tasked with counting every item in a store, looked like an endless maze of packaged underwear and circular clothes racks. The only interesting thing about the job was the barcodes. In our crash training course, we learned there were many different types of barcodes. I had always thought there was only one, maybe two types of barcodes, an assumption probably stemming from the “universal” in the “Universal Product Code.” But it turned out there was an entire barcode genealogy, reaching back decades. You had your Codabar, your EAN-13, MSI, CPC binary, GS-1 DataBar, Plessey. Those loaded little symbols—stamped on products like tattoos of doomed Tetris games and heavy ink rain—fascinated me. I started a journal about the job, even wrote a short story revolving around barcodes. As I submitted for the headcount each morning my stomach churned with a feeling I had never experienced before—one of having sunk to a deeply shameful place in life.

In the living room with my father, watching CNN, I told him I was now in the “inventory systems management field.” My father is a tall black man with a broad smile like a set of 88 keys with a few gone crooked. My father flashed that smile when I lied to him about my job at RGIS, acted as though he believed the picture I painted. I had tried to give him the idea that I was at a desk all day behind a computer, using my brain to do my *inventory systems managing*. A need to

impress my father had always squeezed me. On the living room wall hung a picture of his boyhood school. It was one of about two dozen black-and-white photos of the family my father left behind in Mississippi in 1949. Blurry women in frocks sitting on the porches of shotgun homes, seeming to shade their eyes from the photos' overexposure as much as from the Mississippi sun. The old schoolhouse, where black children were given the chance at an 8th grade education beneath the tutelage of female teachers, looked like a logging cabin as much as a place of learning. My father had just finished 7th grade when he left Mississippi to make his way north to Chicago with a dream of becoming a blues singer, a dream that would eventually lead to a Grammy nomination. I was in 8th grade when my father walked out on my mother and me and moved in with another woman. At the time, it didn't seem as though my father's departure was a big deal: he was already gone for weeks on end anyway, out on cross-country tours with his band, sometimes overseas. The rest of the time he was playing local blues clubs, which made him a nocturnal being. I was never to knock on Dad's door in the daytime. In the mornings he had usually just gone to bed after returning from a blues gig.

Before he moved out I was an A student—there were dozens of high honor roll certificates taped to our suburban living room wall. It was the summer after he left, when I was 13, during the long days in which I was home alone while my mother was off working one of her two jobs, that baggies of weed and backpack-stashed bottles of whiskey began circulating among my crowd of friends. My mother never reported to Dad my fall from academic grace, ditto the drug problem, and so my father had permanently fixed in his mind memories of that promising boy. Two years before he left us, in 1993, when I was in 6th grade, my father was interviewed by

a local radio station in honor of his long blues career. Somehow, all my friends at school had gotten word of it, and were tuned in as the interviewer asked my father if he had any kids.

”One son,” my father said. “Jason. My pride, my boy. The boy can do no wrong.”

The next day at school, I was subject to endless ribbing: “Hey! It’s Jason! *The boy who can do no wrong.*”

I was always trying to pretend I was living up to the honor roll position in life for which my father still believed I was destined. I portrayed whatever sad job I was holding down at any given time as a potentially great thing, a posting rich with career paths. 95% of my post-8th grade conversations with my father more closely resembled formal reports than Dad-Son interactions—a painfully lukewarm relationship.

“It’s a good job,” I went on lying that evening in the living room, as images of urban warfare in Fallujah flashed across the screen. “We work some major accounts. Victoria’s Secret, Macy’s.”

“What I don’t understand is why they have to collect you all and put you in vans to work, like you say.”

I had let slip a few too many details of the job. My father is a successfully self-taught man. I’m sure he had some inkling of what my “inventory systems management” meant.

“It’s good for the environment,” I said nonchalantly. “Companies are all about that these days, you know. Carpooling. Vanpooling, whatever. The whole going green thing.”

I lied again to my father a few weeks later, claiming there were mass layoffs at RGIS. The job was really only a temporary type of thing, anyway.

The best way to make my father proud and maintain some level of dignity, I felt, was to leave him—and to do that I'd have to find a decent job. I was 26-years-old, living with a parent. I felt like a loser. Most of the childhood friends I had who weren't dead or in jail still lived with their parents, and would for the rest of their lives—Trey had lived with his parents all the way up to that point (he was one year older than me), and still does to this day. Trey's mother had lived with *her* mother her entire life. Living with my parents was one trend among my circle of friends I didn't want to follow. I arranged another meeting with Trey that spring. Maybe he would have some better leads this time.

“We could start dealing again, like back in the day,” Trey suggested. He knew I had a solid coke connection with a Mexican dude in K-Town from whom kilos came reliably and cheap, and my friend J.T. was plugged into all sorts of channels when it came to high-grade marijuana.

“Not getting back in. Dealing means prison, eventually.”

“We'll just sell weed. You ain't got a criminal record yet and so you ain't gonna' do no real time even if you get popped with a pound. Goddamn you don't make sense.” Trey always burst with exasperation whenever I displayed ignorance involving the intricacies of the penal code of Illinois. “Well, maybe you'd do a few weeks in Cook County if you couldn't make bail or whatever. But we'd be careful so it wouldn't come to that. Probably.”

“I'm not going back to dealing. That's out.”

“You could always put in for a security gig. My pops knows some of the hiring people at Securitas.”

Trey's father had worked the night shift for a private security company most of his life, hoping his son wouldn't have to, but Trey had never held any other job besides security guard. Security is a common career path, if it can be called that, in the black neighborhoods of Chicago, the majority of such officers in the city being black or Hispanic. There was an unofficial hierarchy in the world of private security jobs. Start-up contractors were at the bottom. They usually had officers working at various businesses. A hardware store here, an outdoor festival there. Sometimes it turned out the companies weren't even legitimate: paychecks would stop coming for the officers, and suddenly the “company” would pull a disappearing act. The Better Business Bureau would get involved and lawsuits would follow. A few months later, the owner of a small security company might be found dead on the West Side, and that was that. At the other end of the spectrum was the Cadillac of mindless security jobs: the permanent station in a downtown office building with an established company. The uniformed man or woman who asks for ID so as to write your name down and call up to confirm your appointment. A cake job. Livable income, stable, and supremely boring. The link between the African-American community and the security watchperson was highlighted in *Next Friday*, where Ice Cube and Mike Epps were employees of the fictional Top Flight Security Company. After the release of *Next Friday*, it was not uncommon on the South Side of Chicago for a young person recently hired as a security guard to be ridiculed by his or her peers with a taunt of “Look at you. You Top-Flight-Security-lame-ass-motherfucker.”

“I don't want security,” I said, and I meant it.

Security was always a possibility, of course, but I would be ashamed to report to my father that I'd resorted to a security job. I hoped it wouldn't come to that; hoped Trey would have a better suggestion.

“There's good security jobs too. Like you could apply for that TSA shit. At the airport.”

“Shitty security at the airport? Not much of a step up from shitty security in general.”

“Naw, it ain't a shitty private company. It's federal. A real gig. You could make a career out of that shit. It's easy as hell to get in. Obviously, since my friends are pulling it off. Pays better than most security jobs, since it's government. Shit, I put in an application.”

Trey paused, quietly turning this next piece of information over before coming out with it.

“I got accepted to the first application stage for TSA. But I failed the motherfucking test.”

I realized then why Trey had only brought up his best job lead after several beers, and reluctantly: he was ashamed of having failed the TSA test. Trey was like Bigger Thomas when sitting down for job-related matters with white people in white domains. He would stammer his way through the meeting, obsequious to the core, going so far as to issue “yes sir”s and “no ma'am”s at the end of every other sentence in what was probably perceived by potential employers as behavior indicative of a military background, but was actually more along the lines of a “yessuh massa suh” affair. Terrifically painful to watch. But behind the suppliant smile was a dream waiting to explode—a festering resentment toward the white man or woman standing at the gates of employment whom Trey perceived as the one pulling the strings on his shuck-and-jive performance. As soon as Trey was away from the gatekeeper, safe outside on the downtown

sidewalk, he would curse himself for his degrading performance, and then curse his idea of the cause of it all, muttering unprintable vows, mostly involving white people.

“So you failed the TSA test,” I said. “It's nothing. I got fired from Home Depot down in Florida for not knowing the difference between a cordless drill and an impact driver. So what's the TSA test like?”

“Easy. It'll be real easy for you, I bet. It's just like an English and math test. You've always been good at tests and shit. And then you gotta' take a crazy-ass x-ray test with a bunch of shapes and colors.”

I slogged through the TSA online application the next day, a real nightmare of a form. I had to lie on a lot of it: Have you ever been involved with criminal activities? Do you have any friends who have been involved with criminal activities? Have you ever been involved with drugs? In forming this fictional Jason Harrington fit for federal employment, it felt less like I was applying for a job and more like I was workshopping a potential character for a novel. *Jay Harrington, clean-cut boy from Westmont, Illinois, venturing into the world to make good in the fight against terrorism for the Department of Homeland Security*—the version of me I'd want my parents to find in a book, though neither of them read very much. I remember almost giving up at several points, the application was so tedious. At one point, after losing an hour's worth of work due to a system failure on the TSA's end, I nearly threw in the towel and headed up the street to grab a six pack of beer, sobriety be damned.

But I stuck it out, and eventually clicked send. I didn't think much of it. Surely, a guy like me didn't have a shot in hell with a sub-agency of the Department of Homeland Security.

In August I received an email from the Transportation Security Administration. I knew almost nothing about what the agency did—after talking to Trey about the job and filling out the application months prior, I remembered only that they dealt with airports and security.

Dear Jason E. Harrington,

We have received your application for the position of 1802-Transportation Security Officer (TSO) (Screener)-ORD006. After reviewing your qualifications, we regret to inform you that you did not meet the minimum qualifications for this position. Please refer to the job announcement for a complete listing of requirements.

We thank you for your interest in employment with the Transportation Security Administration and wish you the best in your career.

Sincerely,

Office of Human Capital

No shit I wasn't qualified for federal security. I had spent most of my life avoiding security and law enforcement forces, in general. It was no shocker that I wasn't a good fit for the

job, though I wasn't sure exactly how they knew that—on paper I was just a relatively young guy with a high school diploma and 2 years of college. As I would later learn, that meant I had more going for me than three quarters of the TSA workforce, at least. But no matter, I thought. It was probably better I didn't end up with a job like that, anyway.

A few months later, in December, I received another email.

Dear Jason E. Harrington,

Thank you again for expressing interest in the 1802-Transportation Security Officer (TSO) (Screener)-ORD006 position with the Transportation Security Administration.

You have met the eligibility requirements stated in the vacancy announcement; therefore, you are invited to take a two and one half (2 1/2) hour computerized test as the next phase of the evaluation process. Your interest in employment with the Transportation Security Administration is appreciated.

Sincerely,

Office of Human Capital

Why or how I had gone, between the dates of August 4 to December 1, from ineligible to eligible in my suitability to act as a stand-up defender of the rules and regulations of the

Transportation Security Administration, I wasn't sure. But hey, if the federal government and the Office of Human Capital was game, so was I.

CHAPTER THREE
I'M GOOD WITH CROWDS

“I WORK for *The Department of Homeland Security* now. Tomorrow’s day 1 of training,” I told my mother on the phone the night before the big day, my freshly ironed trainee-wear laid out on the bed before me in my father’s spare bedroom. Throughout most of my life it felt as though I’d failed to make my mother proud. This was my big chance. “Last line of defense for the nation’s airways, Mom. Stopping terrorists and all.”

“It’s not going to be dangerous, is it?” she’d asked. “Stopping the terrorists?”

My mother was 67 to my 26. I was the swan song of her fertility, leading to a strange family arrangement wherein I’d grown up with a half-niece one year younger than I, for whom my mother was “grandma.” It was appropriate, hearing my mother thus referred to: she often had the sweet mannerisms of a doting grandmother. Toward the end of my time at the TSA I would be introduced to my mother’s friends at her nursing home as her son, *the one who looks for terrorists* at the airport, and I kind of liked it.

“Things could get dangerous Mom, sure. Probably nothing to worry about though. I’ll know more tomorrow,” I told her, doing my best to assume the cryptic air of a government agent setting out on a Top Secret mission.

Training class began with the usual Go Around the Room and Say Your Name and What Your Deal Is, which yielded little of interest besides the sobering fact that all 15 of us had simply been desperate and in need of a job before stumbling into the gig, with no particular long-standing desire to work for a security agency or for the American people, besides maybe little Anthony Vasquez up there in the front row, who mentioned something about childhood FBI dreams. I sat next to Marquita, a large woman with green contact lenses that sometimes betrayed the brown cornea beneath them when she blinked. She didn’t talk much. It would turn out she had already been a TSA employee for several years starting back in ’02, but had taken a year off due to family issues. She was already scornful of the TSA officer position since she was so well acquainted with it. She knew more about TSA than anyone in that training class, instructors included. About halfway through the Go Around, one of the trainees was clever enough to add to her impromptu personal narrative, “9/11 affected me deeply, and so I’m here,” which was a great relief to all who followed in the meet-and-greet routine: it was the much-needed phrase the room didn’t realize it needed, the phrase that could take any manner of awkward Name-and-a-Bit-About-Yourself introduction and give it a patriotic patina. Soon, everyone was riffing on the “I’m here to be an airport security agent because of 9/11” line.

“My name is Jason. I just got back from a couple years in Florida, sort of an extended vacation,” I said when my turn came. I was certain the trainers, Chet and Marcus, were making a

mental note to check me off the list of potentials. I tried a different tack. “I didn’t miss the Chicago winters, I’ll tell you that much. But even down in Orlando I never forgot 9/11. And so when I saw the TSA job opening, I knew I had to sign up.”

Everyone nodded gravely.

After we’d gone all around the room, Chet stood looking out over us with a hint of satisfaction, while Marcus, who’d taken a seat on a desk pushed over into the corner of the room, looked on as if to see which cheesy direction his co-trainer would next take the proceedings.

“OK, great,” Chet said. “The one thing I’m sort of hearing across the board here is ‘9/11.’ And that’s good. That’s always the case in these training classes, because that’s why we’re here. That’s why the TSA is here. Marcus, lights?” The room went dim. “So now let’s watch a video.”

There are few things more torturous to watch than a company training video. This one had American flags rippling in the wind and D-list actors playing passengers who smiled and thanked TSA agents for confiscating their liquids and lighters. By the time the lights came back up half the class was asleep—the portion that was immune to appeals to emotion or who had lost interest after the opening action sequence—and the other half was teary eyed. Personally, I was having second thoughts about this whole TSA gig. Propaganda never sat well with me. The thought of never again drinking while holding a job with the TSA was already beginning to look unfeasible. This basic rift in reactions (sleep, tears) to the Never Forget routine characterized what I would come to find out was the basic ideological topography of the TSA workforce—those who bought into the patriotic dimensions of what we were doing as airport security screeners, seeing some kind of divine command at play, and those who just wanted it all to be

over fast, with as little thought put into the whole deal as possible, preferably with a pension and lifetime health benefits at the end.

Chet next announced, in a somber tone, that we would again be going around the room to share more information, this time to tell everyone Where We Were When It Happened. This go-round started from the back of the room, which meant I didn't have much time to think.

Rhonda from the West Side was in her early twenties and planned on working TSA part-time, on top of working as an EMT, all as a means by which to put herself through college. Over the next 6 years I would occasionally see Rhonda in my various assignments around O'Hare. Her boundless energy, wry wit, and unflagging determination to succeed in life never failed to depress me: it was easy to feel inadequate and privileged next to Rhonda's never-ending tale of triumph over adversity.

"I was making breakfast for my twins," Rhonda said. "I had just poured the pancake mix in the pan. It was their birthday, too. So I had to throw a damn double birthday party on 9/11. I'll have to do this for the next 15 years, at least. I'll make it work, though."

When my turn came I had to lie my ass off. The morning of 9/11 I was supposed to be in class; I was enrolled as a junior at Columbia College Chicago. But I'd spent the entire night before and early morning snorting coke in my apartment living room with my childhood friend J.T., with whom I was selling kilos of cocaine I picked up from a Latin King in Chicago. J.T. was tall, shaggy-haired, a nerd-at-heart who, like me, found in drug dealing a way to fit in. Everyone loves the guy with the cocaine, especially at 3 in the morning. J.T. had been my best friend since 2nd grade, the two of us sharing the experience of awkward middle-school years and

households without fathers. As is usually the case with an all-night coke fest, the night of September 10, 2001 ended with the sunrise depression and J.T. and I, after having spent hours jabbering sentimentally about our days growing up and floating pie-eyed plans to transition our dealings into a legitimate business, miserably resigning ourselves to a heart-palpating, sedative-laced attempt at sleep. I must have finally dozed off at about 7:30 A.M, because I was awakened soon after by my girlfriend at the time, calling me on my first cellphone.

“They’re evacuating downtown,” she said. The wind blew static over her flip phone. I could hear sirens blaring and the shouts of what sounded like an angry Chicago police officer. As unhappy as I was about being roused from hard-won coke sleep, I dimly realized that my girlfriend’s news of the wholesale evacuation of a major city center was probably something worth sitting up for. She was a sophomore at Loyola University at the time, but she’d actually gone into the city for class that day, instead of skipping, as I had.

“Why?” I asked.

“Terrorists attacked New York with planes. There are more planes headed for the Sears Tower. Downtown is empty.”

Those who remember that day will tell you that early on, no one knew what was going on—conflicting reports as to why the World Trade Center was burning and collapsing, who was behind it, how the Pentagon fit into it, if there were more planes up in the air and headed to other destinations. My mother quickly cut through all the misinformation.

“They think it’s Ben Loden,” she said over the phone, calling me from her job as a secretary at an insurance company. For at least an hour or two I was under the earnest impression

that America was under siege by some white asshole named Ben. The only image of a white terrorist I could conjure that seemed to correspond to the magnitude of destruction at hand was that of Hans Gruber in *Die Hard*, some shadowy mastermind with an accent and a three-piece suit directing this massive operation over a walkie-talkie, from a mountain fortress somewhere in the Rockies.

None of this seemed quite right for the class.

“Morning of 9/11, I was in school. I was a junior in college. Had just sat down in a history class I was enrolled in at the time when the text messages started hitting people’s cell phones. I didn’t know what to say,” I said. “I didn’t sleep for days. I was shocked. I still sort of am.”

After a few more anecdotes involving Where People Were, a girl’s voice came from the front row.

“I was...well, in 5th grade I guess,” the girl said. Up until that point all I’d noticed about the girl was her hair—two brunette buns that prompted me to mentally dub her Princess Leia. There were a few laughs, and the definite sense that the room’s eyes and ears had shifted to the girl.

“I know, I know, I’m a baby. But I was in school, and I remember like, the teacher told us something bad was happening in New York, and I... was scared I guess? When I was older I understood it better. Now I know that it started at airports and so I’m here,” she said. “Shut up,” she added in a whisper to Vasquez, who had ribbed her about her age beneath his breath from a couple seats down.

The trainee's name was Vivian, and she was 17-years-old.

Not many people know this, but it is (or at least it was, in one case) possible to be employed with the TSA at the age of 17. All that's required of an applicant is to be of a legal age with a GED or equivalent, and a lack of a visible felonious criminal record. Most of my co-workers over the years would dispute the veracity of my stories involving the 17-year-old girl in my training class, claiming that 18 was the minimum cut-off, but I would eventually go so far as to furtively check her driver's license just to verify her age. When she confessed to the class—with a ¾ turn that finally gave me and the rest of the trainees in the back rows a view of her blushing face—that she almost could have been one of the children to whom Bush had been reading “The Pet Goat” when the bad news was whispered into his ear that morning, you could practically hear the people in the room doing the mental calculations and wondering How. She was a Mexicana, born and raised on the North Side of Chicago, obviously a smart and focused young woman: she had graduated from high school a little early, one year prior, in 2006. During that last year at Roberto Clemente High she'd applied for the TSA as part of some sort of jobs fair, and was then immediately accepted due to the dearth of female officers at the TSA. And so during her final days of school, 17-year-old Vivian could tell her fellow seniors that she'd already been accepted for employment with the Transportation Security Administration, with only one qualification pending: her diploma. Within a week of walking across the stage at Roberto Clemente in May of '07, the training department sent 17-year-old Vivian the same email the rest of us older folks had received.

As the rest of Day 1 wore on I found it increasingly difficult to keep my eyes on the spec charts projected on the overhead and off of Vivian. My observer eyes-in-training swept from her hair, to the lobes of her ears, tracing the tender in-curve of her neck as the instructors rattled off the specs for new carry-on x-ray scanners that weren't even in use at O'Hare.

For her part, Vivian, in the fight against sleep that all of us were waging, took to turning around to sneak looks at us, the bored trainees behind her, which sometimes brought about stomach-flipping eye contact. Her eyes were green. I could already tell, as the narrator droned on in another training video with a full rundown of the security layers protecting our transportation infrastructure (the final layer was the American public, which seemed to me the only honest-to-goodness layer involved), that it was going to be 2 weeks of silently obsessing about this girl and her top knots, driven by grotesque fantasies comprising riffs on the Jabba the Hut-Hans Solo rescue scene in *Return of the Jedi*.

Later in the week we were all seated in the training department's computer lab, analyzing test carry-on luggage images, in preparation for the IMA we would soon be taking. The Image Mastery Assessment was the final test that a TSA officer-in-training had to take so as to prove the ability to operate the x-ray machine. Before we would even be released from the training classroom and loosed on the floor for on-the-job training, we would have to pass a watered-down version of the IMA. Marquita confirmed, in whispers, that these x-ray practice tests were one of the few things we had to master in order to keep a job at the TSA. When I found myself seated next to Vivian on one of our daily hour-long practice sessions on the bag search simulator,

analyzing digitized clumps of computer-generated suitcases, purses and backpacks for the presence of guns and bombs, I began talking to her out of the side of my mouth.

“I think I’m fucked,” I said to her, as I incorrectly clicked “Clear” on a bag that actually, as the computer program instantly informed me, was not clear—there was a cartoon .44 magnum beneath the computer-generated laptop, now highlighted in Shame On You Red by the software. “I’m not getting half of these. I wouldn’t want to fly with me in charge of security.”

“You’ll get the hang of it,” she said, looking over at my on-screen blunders with a smile. She was doing well with her test bags, correctly identifying almost all of the terrorist threats—the fact that she had refrained from looking over at me probably helped. I would later come to find out that the closer a TSA officer is to being a digital native—a video game kid—the better his or her innate skill vis-à-vis identifying threats on the x-ray machine. Vivian’s birth coincided with the release of Super Nintendo.

“I like it,” I said nervously, my eyes back in line, fixed on the screen in search of IEDs, though my mind was focused on finding something to say that wouldn’t make me look like a moron. “The whole Princess Leia thing you got going on. With the hair.”

She looked over for a moment with a vacant smile.

“Princess who?”

I wept a little right then, inside, for future generations.

She came into training each day with a little pink backpack, inside of which, along with a notepad, pen, and the quickly accumulating pile of useless handouts the trainers were giving us, was cherry vanilla body lotion, the scent of which wafted back to us in the second row,

exacerbating the daily crises that occurred when the trainers asked us all to stand up for one reason or another, in our relatively tight-fitting dress pants. We were being paid to become trained observers, and most of us were either sleeping, or fantasizing about a 17-year-old female TSA trainee.

“Yeah, she’s cute,” Vasquez conceded to me one day on our lunch break, in the cafeteria on the first floor. We shared the cafeteria with the other employees of the office park’s business suites, which mostly amounted to silk-shirted salespeople and debt collection agents, who wore condescending little smiles as they passed us at the TSA table. It was like high school all over again. I had been a debt collector for several years, both in Illinois and Florida. Even a debt collector, it seemed, held more prestige than a TSA officer in training. I should have known right then I was in trouble. “She gave me her phone number yesterday,” Vasquez coolly added.

I tried to pretend I didn’t care, though the cafeteria fries on my paper plate suddenly looked even less appetizing than before. There had clearly been some flirtation going on up there in the front row between Vivian and Vasquez, but I didn’t realize until then it was that serious, and it now felt as though I was learning to defend the homeland from the threat of terror with no real reward in sight. Vivian was into Vasquez. A young, chipmunk-looking Disney boy, as far as I was concerned. As the week wore on it became nearly unbearable, watching Vivian checking out Vasquez, but I had to admit it made sense: he was closer to Vivian’s 17 years of age—Vasquez was 21—and greatly preferable in Vivian’s eyes, most likely, next to my grandfatherly-by-comparison 27. Then there was the fact that he could pass for the sensitive guy in a boy band:

spiky hair, shy smile and everything. It was torture, knowing that I had been doomed by a goddamned N’Sync backup boy.

To complete the affect, Vasquez had the ability to moonwalk, and moonwalk well, which had come to garner requests from classmates and even a few TSA higher-ups on breaks as well as before and after class, requests he obliged with good humor, occasionally putting in an MJ spin and crotch grab as an additional crowd pleaser. This worked especially well since Vasquez wore white socks beneath his TSA-mandated all-black pants, a uniform violation that was excused for Vasquez in return for his impromptu performances. But outside of those early violations, Vasquez rarely fell on the wrong side of TSA rules over the next 6 years. It was clear even back then that Vasquez, with his childhood FBI dreams and laser-concentration during all of the TSA training presentations, not only bought all the propaganda, but was actually *savoring* it. He had already earned a reputation as the top-gun x-ray operator in the group, maybe the best the trainers had ever seen pass through the classroom. Moonwalking, x-ray detection skills—Vasquez must have looked like a superhero to Vivian.

It was no real problem that my mind was thus occupied during most of training, because almost none of the information that we were being bombarded with held any real import. Marquita missed few opportunities to point this out, and the trainers themselves quietly agreed with her. The piece of information most relentlessly drilled into our heads was the answer to “How many swipes can be performed on a single item with the trace explosives swab must be inserted into the ETD machine?” (seven). Marquita assured us that the answers to all these picayune questions would only ever matter again, if ever, during the annual SOP test that the

TSA conducted, which rarely carried the power to make or break continued employment with the agency. Officers simply crammed the week before the test, and that was enough for almost everyone to get a passing score and retain certification.

“All you really need to remember is how to pat someone down, and some of the basics on doing a bag check. Show up to work most of the time and don’t get caught doing something stupid, and you’ll never get fired by TSA,” Marquita told me one day on a smoke break.

The thing I found most interesting was the selectee list. It was a list of seven countries the citizens of which were to receive *special attention*. Anyone holding a passport from one of those nations was to be given enhanced screening: full-body pat-down, explosives tests, bags riffled through. It was in my class notes, which I still have today, that I first re-ordered the list’s sequence as presented by Chet into an easy-to-remember poem.

Syria, Algeria, Afghanistan
Iraq, Iran, Yemen
and Cuba,
Lebanon-Libya, Somalia-Sudan
People’s Republic of North Korea.

“You’ll never see a North Korean passport,” Marcus said.

“Cuba’s rare,” Marquita added.

I couldn't help but wonder why Cuba was on the list. The presence of all the Islamic states was politically self-evident, sadly, but Cuba? Marcus said it was purely about poor diplomatic relations.

At one point toward the end of the first week we were all paired up in order to perform simulations of officer-passenger interactions. We began with simulated bag searches. The trainee playing the passenger was instructed to be as angry and noncompliant as possible, in order to realistically simulate the TSA experience. Marquita volunteered to play the passenger for the first performance, in a scenario that had a trainee named Kurt doing a bag check on Marquita-as-passenger, rummaging through a carry-on. It was a duffel bag that the trainers had prepared, full of common traveler items such as shirts, jeans, a hairdryer, shoes, and, hidden somewhere in the bag, a pocket knife that the theoretical passenger had "forgotten," which pocket knife it was the duty of Kurt to find.

"OK. Ready Kurt?" Marcus asked, peeking in the door. He and Marquita-the-passenger were outside, where Marcus was coaching her on how to be a convincing passenger, although there was no doubt Marquita knew the role backward and forward.

"Yep. Let's do it," Kurt replied.

"OK. Marquita, come in."

Marquita walked in, affecting the carriage of a sulky, slouch-shouldered passenger.

"Ma'am, is this your bag?" Kurt asked, voice trembling.

"Gimme my bag," Marquita said, her eyes tearing into Kurt. "What right you have to hold my fuckin' suitcase?"

Kurt looked to Marcus, unsure of how to proceed. Was this in the script? Marcus only stared back: this was a taste of the checkpoint. Deal with it.

“Ma’am, under, uh...the Fourth Amendment,” Kurt stammered, “we have to...I have to look through this bag. It’s an administrative search...you see, the moment you stepped in the line back there...”

“I’ll save you a whole lotta’ time and tell you ain’t nothin’ in there,” Passenger Marquita said. “I’m late for my flight. Quit playin.” And with that, Marquita reached out and grabbed the duffel bag from Kurt and walked out of the classroom. Marcus laughed and Chet shouted “whoa whoa whoa.”

“What was that, Kurt?” Chet asked. “Did you just let a passenger walk away with a flagged carry-on? There could have been a gun in there, and Marquita just snatched it right out of your hands and walked away into a crowded airport.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Kurt asked. “She was really aggressive. They won’t really do that, will they?”

By then Marquita had walked back into the classroom, and joined Chet and Marcus in their laughter at Kurt’s naiveté. Yes, we would find out, passengers really were that aggressive, which was why it was essential to Maintain Control of the Passenger and Property at All Times. This was probably the number one rule when it came to working the floor.

On lunch break, down in the cafeteria, Vasquez gave me the only piece of welcome information that day: he wasn’t into Vivian. He probably wouldn’t even call her. At first I thought that it was maybe the age thing, but it turned out 17 wasn’t the problem.

“I’m into blonde girls,” he said, cutting a chicken nugget into quadrants with a plastic cafeteria knife. “Blonde hair, blue eyes,” he glanced around to make sure the other trainees were out of earshot, which they were, scattered in pairs and groups of three around the cafeteria. Vivian had taken to sitting with Marquita and Rhonda. “And big tits. I’m more into Samantha. Latinas aren’t my thing,” he whispered.

Samantha! Vasquez liked the blonde trainee with too much makeup! “Not into Latinas, white women only for me,” says the Quiet, Sensitive One. Emboldened by this game-changing information, I took the initiative on the Blue Line ride home and sat next to Vivian before Vasquez could. Up until that point I thought that taking the seat next to her would infuriate Vasquez and cause Viv to politely ask me to switch seats so as to stay near her crush. But it turned out that Vasquez was actually relieved at the prospect of a train ride free of hand-holding pressure from Vivian, and was more than happy to focus on his PSP in the seat behind us. It seemed that Vivian, for her part, had tired of her fruitless, week-long pursuit of Vasquez, and was even willing to laugh at my jokes. If it was all a play to make Vasquez jealous, I didn’t even care. The Disney Kid was in the window seat behind us, absorbed in *Grand Theft Auto* and Barbie fantasies.

“Where you stay at?” I asked Vivian, trying to play the role of a streetwise, youngish Chicago Puerto Rican, a part I sort of looked, what with my White Sox hat pulled low and tilted slightly to the left. The boat-like oscillation of the El caused our legs to occasionally touch, and I remember, at least once, my hand brushing against her leg, as well—a soft warmth beneath her black TSA-approved pants.

“I’m right off the California stop. Near Logan Square,” she said.

“How much is rent there?” I asked.

“Not sure. I live with my parents.”

“Yeah, I know how it goes. I remember them days,” I said, omitting the fact that I was also living with a parent. “I got a roommate out in Skokie right now. As soon as I get a couple of these checks saved up, I’m moving somewhere around your area. Logan Square. Maybe Bucktown. So what’s your game plan with this job? Just work it through college?”

I had somehow assumed that this girl, at this age, would be somewhat dazzled by the fact that she was a federal employee, working beneath the *Department of Homeland Security*, no less. It had taken me 27 years to reach that status, after all, and I was relatively proud and enamored of it.

“I hope to get out of this job before I even graduate college,” she said. “I already put in a transfer to Immigration and Customs.” I imagined her in a chalk-striped suit, maybe with a bowtie, the heavy hitter of Roberto Clemente High’s debate team. “I see this as a stepping stone,” she continued. “I don’t want to be patting people down for the rest of my life with the TSA. Hell no.” She looked over at me with a smile, as though expecting to find someone with whom to share this absurd prospect-as-punch line. “Really, I’d like to work my way up to the State Department, at least.”

“Oh hell yeah. Of course,” I said, my original Act Young and Cool strategy having been thrown into disarray by the young future senator. “I concur. This is just a stepping stone.”

When she gave me her number, I reassured myself that although she was young, she was, after all, a Transportation Security Administration employee. Within a few days we were rubbing up against each other on the sly during x-ray operator tutorials and sneaking kisses during breaks.

The only moment of training week that made us all sit up at attention was the announcement that we would each be taking part in pat-down simulations in front of the class. For those who have never held a job where you're expected to pat down hundreds of people every day, the first time you do it is somewhat awkward. After two whole days devoted to teaching us the full-body pat-down and hand-held metal detector search procedures, they matched up all the trainees with same-sex partners and announced that we would be showing what we'd learned in front of everyone and then critiqued on our performances by the training instructors.

The prospect of having to get up in front of groups of people in order to perform has always terrified me beyond the normal fear-of-speaking flight-or-flight reaction. I once nearly fainted from shortness of breath in a college class after being asked to read aloud a portion of an essay I'd written—dripping sweat and gasping for air, the teacher actually took me outside of the room to ask me if I needed medical attention. I was so embarrassed that I never showed up for the class again.

Vasquez and I paired up, having bonded over the Vivian Question. After we all did a few practice pat-downs in our pairs, Chet asked us to help him scoot the tables and chairs back into

position and regain our seats, as it was time for the main event: one by one, each pair would go to the front of the class for all to see, in order to do their thing.

Stay calm, I told myself, heart rate quickening. Vasquez and I sat toward the back, watching a few of the other pairs go first, with one trainee assuming the position while the other talked his or her way through the pat-down. I almost wished Vasquez and I had volunteered to go first as I watched my classmates nervously run through all the points of the procedures. Watching all these people being patted down was like a slow-walk to the gallows, knowing I would have to go soon. Vivian went before me. Paired with Rhonda, she gave the most competent pat-down up to that point. Chet and Marcus went out of their way to praise her afterward.

When Vasquez and I were called to the front of the room, I volunteered to do him first. Get it out of the way, jump in and go for it before I had time to overthink it. So the next thing I knew I was standing in front of 14 white shirts and two TSA training instructors, launching into my first real public pat-down. I came hard right out the gates with advisements (a couple of the trainees who had already gone had forgotten the advisements, leading to a gentle chiding from Chet).

“Sir, I’m gonna’ be giving you a pat-down, touching you from the top of your head to the bottom of your feet. If you would like a private pat-down, we can go into a private area. Would you like a private pat-down?” I asked Vasquez. He shook his head no. I took an internal deep breath and got to work. It was all a blur, with 30-something eyes in my peripheral the entire time, assessing my performance and threatening to trigger a panic attack, but I powered through,

keeping my mind focused on one basic self-directive: put your hands over as much of this little man's body as possible, and make sure you don't go light on his ass, for God's sake. Next thing I knew I was asking Vasquez to sit down so I could pat the bottom of his feet, and it was over. Only a light sheen of sweat on my forehead. I looked out at the sea of fellow trainees and was surprised to see that a few of them weren't even watching; they'd covertly busied themselves with cell phones or doodling. I made eye contact with Vivian, who returned an easy smile. She probably wished she were me at that moment, due not to my performance, but to my access to Vasquez's body.

“Not bad, Harrington. You went light on the buttocks, it seemed. He go light on your buttocks, Vasquez?”

“Yeah, he did,” Vasquez said with a pang of disappointment.

“Light on the buttocks. And did he miss anything else, class?”

Chet gave a brief lecture for my and the class's benefit on the importance of covering the areas I'd missed, but I didn't mind. I was just happy to have gotten through it without suffering a total breakdown. It was over. Now all I had to do was stand there while Vasquez took his turn doing me.

I raised my arms for Vasquez, palms up, feet shoulder-width apart, and instantly realized my mistake: being the *pattee* was the panic-inducing role.

For most of my adult life I have had a paunch, which cannot be done away with no matter how much weight I lose. Excess fat, cellulite. The paunch has caused more than one woman to drunkenly comment at what would normally be a time for pleasant pre-coital banter, “Why do

you have a stomach like that? It's pretty weird, for a person your age," nearly reducing me to tears. Now, with my white, tucked-in shirt stretched taut across my abdomen and my arms spread wide, the paunch was quite visible, I realized, to an entire classroom full of people, including Vivian there in the second row, watching intently. As Vasquez snapped on the blue latex gloves and started in on the routine advisements, I felt sweat forming on my forehead—a couple drops inching down my back like bugs. Jesus, what if Vasquez stopped the entire pat-down there in front of the class, announcing, "He's too sweaty. I can't work with this"? Vasquez, staying true to form, was doing a thorough job, beating his hands against me, putting me on the backs of my heels and nearly off-balance. As he ran his hands over my stomach I looked out into the class full of faces and made brief eye contact with Vivian. I had hoped to find her busy with her cell phone; instead there were those green eyes, watching with all the focus of a figure skating judge. As Vasquez finished up with the front of my body, advising me that I could now lower my arms to the side, it occurred to me that, with my male pattern baldness (which had begun to set in at the age of 18) I likely appeared to Vivian at that moment as a fat, old, balding sweaty man, being patted down by her true love, a little FBI-bound Disney dreamboat. I used the opportunity afforded by Vasquez's order to lower my arms to quickly wipe the sweat from my face with a forearm, sweat which had begun to crawl down my temples. To make matters worse, Chet instructed me to turn around just as Vasquez started patting my back side, so as to give the entire classroom a view of my behind, and his rear handiwork. The classroom suddenly felt like an 18th-century anatomical theater, lacking only the raised seating and a knife. The good news was that at that point, my face was turned away from the crowd, so that the sweatiness on my face

didn't much matter anymore. The bad news: 1) The classroom had gained a view of my sweat-dripping back, and 2) I now essentially had Justin Bieber patting my ass down in front of a hot teenage girl I really wanted to get into. Vivian also gained a humiliating rear view of the love handles that have doggedly accompanied my paunch through most of my life.

By the time it was over, I was sweating so heavily I had to wipe my forehead twice in the time it took for Chet and the rest of the trainees to critique Vasquez's performance. I had no doubt that at least one person in that classroom was thinking the same thing my college teacher had thought several years before: *Is Jason okay? It looks like he just ran a 10k even though all he did was stand there. Maybe someone should call an ambulance.* Finally, it was over. I sunk into my seat, forcing myself to smile as I was sure that the trainers, as well as a few of the trainees—definitely Rhonda the EMT—were probably now keeping an eye on me to make sure I wasn't going into cardiac arrest. I knew one thing for certain, at that moment: I despised the TSA trainers who had just forced me into that public humiliation, and I would flatly refuse to go to the front of the class for another pat-down demonstration if asked again. Luckily, that was the first and last in-front-of-the-entire-class pat-down I would ever have to give while at the TSA. But it was then that I understood why it was so important that we include the *would you like a private pat-down?* question in our advisements. That was the moment I began to consider what it would feel like for the people on the other side of the security procedures I would be carrying out. It was the birth of a deep-seated sympathy I would secretly hold for many airline passengers—those passengers who, as the years wore on and the airport security routines became more and

more invasive, would choose to opt out of the procedures altogether, or request that they be conducted behind curtains.

It was then that I realized the last thing I wanted to be was an airline passenger.

CHAPTER FOUR
GOING TO WORK IN A CLOWN SUIT

A Partial List of Things for Which I Was Warned I Could Be Written Up or Terminated,
As Drilled Into My Head within the First Two Months of TSA Employment

1. Gum chewing.
2. Letting a passenger walk onto a checkpoint wearing shoes, sandals, or slippers.
3. Allowing a pilot to bring her Swiss army knife aboard the plane.
4. Letting a seeing-eye dog walk onto the checkpoint without thoroughly patting it down.
5. Allowing a passenger to walk onto the checkpoint with a silk scarf around her neck.
6. Allowing a passenger to carry an infant wearing baby shoes onto the checkpoint.
7. Sitting down on one of the chairs tantalizingly positioned at the exit lanes at lower middle and lower north.
8. Using a cell phone within 100 feet of the checkpoint.
9. Failing to apply enough pressure to a baby's body when patting it down, as it could be a terrorist's chosen vessel for bomb delivery.
10. Failing to notice the "SSSS" printed in miniscule letters on certain people's boarding passes, which designated them as a greater security threat than the rest of the population, usually for mysterious reasons.
11. Failing to write "SSSS" on the boarding pass of anyone from Syria, Algeria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Cuba, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, or the People's Republic of North Korea.
12. Failing to confiscate a child's Play-Doh.

13. Failing to confiscate tubs of mashed potatoes and gravy near Thanksgiving, snow globes and hand warmers near Christmastime.
14. Letting a pair of shoes cross my x-ray screen with anything inside of them (change, car keys, et cetera).
15. Allowing a police officer to come through the checkpoint without displaying a blue or red badge.
16. Daring to stop a police officer, for any reason, from rushing onto the checkpoint if he or she was responding to an emergency.
17. Holding down the mic button of my walkie-talkie in the event that I found myself chasing a gunman who had breached security and was shooting at people in the airport.
18. Allowing anyone to get past me without being properly screened, under any circumstances.
19. Laying so much as a hand, under any circumstance, on anyone attempting to get past me, even if they hadn't been properly screened, as we were not allowed to make physical contact with passengers without their permission.
20. Failing to unroll balled-up socks during bag searches.

I BEGAN to hate my role as a U.S. federal employee just before the Fourth of July. I'd been separated from nearly all the people in my training class. Vivian was over on checkpoint 3, half a mile down the concourse, and Vasquez was way over in Terminal 5. Only Rhonda had come with me to 2. Word that morning was that our supervisor, Dr. Mishenko, had something important to brief. I shoved my backpack into an empty locker in our tiny break room, packed shoulder to shoulder with officers.

“Mishenko's unhappy for some reason. Looks like she's got some shit to talk out there on the floor. We better come on,” said Lashaunda, a fellow TSO.

Though Shaunda had only been at the TSA for two years, compared to many of the other officers who had been there since 2002, she had already earned herself a reputation as the unofficial checkpoint leader. She acted as coordinator of the airport-famous potlucks that checkpoint 2 held every few months; her Gullah rice and shrimp killed it without fail. Shaunda was also much more relaxed than most agents, since she wasn't too worried about getting fired. Shaunda had a backup plan: she ran a hair salon out of her apartment on the South Side. After patting down female passengers, often ruffling up their hairdos in the process, she would slip her business card in their hands. She claimed her side-business brought in twice as much as the \$13.61 per hour we were making as TSOs, and I believed her. That, I would learn, was the key to working at the TSA. The smart TSA officer was the one with a hustle on the side, a plan B, since there was any number of things for which an officer could be written up or terminated.

Shaunda also held special contempt for supervisor Mishenko, as the rumor was Mishenko wasn't black-folk-friendly. About half the workforce at TSA O'Hare comprised people of color, like me. In any given Terminal it was common to have a black supervisor and manager running the show. So common, in fact, that you frequently heard accusations from white officers of reverse racism. Shaunda had recently arrived on the late morning shift from early mornings, where she'd had both a black supervisor and manager. The transition to life beneath the reign of Dr. Mishenko caused Shaunda to frequently go for Mishenko's racial jugular.

“Let's get out there and hear what this crazy-ass white woman has to say now,” Shaunda said as she walked out of the dim break room and out onto the bright and noisy Terminal floor, half a dozen TSA agents following in tow.

The late morning crew was gathered off to the side of checkpoint 2, out of earshot of the public. I eased into the back row of the standing crowd of officers just in time for the start of Mishenko's briefing. If you walked up to her briefing even a few seconds late, she would call you to the supervisor's office afterward and write you up.

“Listen up,” she said. The chatter among the crowd of TSOs came to a halt. Mishenko held a piece of paper in front of her, the official briefing points—a combination of items sent down from Washington D.C. and local managerial concerns—but she didn't need them. There was clearly only one issue on Mishenko's mind.

“We had an incident last night on the evening shift. The managers are not happy, and so now *I'm cranky.*”

Cranky was Mishenko code for “furious and looking to fire someone.”

“Many of you seem to be under the impression that sparklers are fun. That sparklers are harmless Fourth of July distractions. It was discovered last night that an x-ray operator allowed a few sparklers to come through his lane. We would have never known had the passenger not come back to the checkpoint after making it through security to ask if it was OK to take the sparklers on the plane. The new hire who was working the line then asked the x-ray operator and the x-ray operator *then told the new-hire* that sparklers are *harmless*, and *allowed to go on planes.*”

She paused to allow the gravity of this statement to sink in, as she always did when reprimanding us, though few people on the checkpoint actually gave a shit about anything she had to say, in any deeper sense. She would roll her gaze from one officer to another, right on down the line, trying her best to bore a hole through all 2 dozen officers' heads. She wore grandma glasses so thick you could actually see the different strata within the lenses—the distinct layers with all their unique imperfections, even the occasional particle trapped inside. It was like going back in time, looking into those bagged eyes. She loved to sneak up on officers as they were performing this or that duty on the checkpoint, find some technical SOP violation to cite, and then wait for the moment to ambush the officer with the news that he or she had just fucked up. You'd be rummaging through a passenger's bag on orders from an x-ray operator, sense something behind you, turn around, and find yourself looking into those giant fishbowls. The one good thing about Mishenko was that you could usually smell her coming: she was a heavy smoker, and ran outside for smoke breaks at least once an hour, though if she caught you taking a minute more than your allotted break time, she would call a manager to the checkpoint just to make sure you really got it.

“Both of the officers who let the sparklers through are suspended, and they may not be coming back. For those of you who want to smile right now—and I can tell some of you think this is funny—maybe you haven't heard about my mother.”

There was no one on the checkpoint who hadn't heard about her mother.

“My mother is a sweet little old lady, 85-years-old. She is also a chemist with a Ph.D. from Heidelberg University. I guarantee that if you saw her come through this checkpoint, none

of you would suspect that sweet little old lady has enough up here,” Dr. Mishenko tapped her temple, “to take out this whole airport with nothing but a few cleaning solvents to be found beneath anyone's sink. Does anyone know what sparklers really are? “

No one dared. Sparkly fun-sticks? It was a trick question.

“Sparklers are sulfur and barium nitrate, for starters. They can make a sparkler bomb.”

Consensus among the people on checkpoint 2 was that Mishenko was the most learned officer in the entire airport. She spoke her mother's Russian, as well as French, Italian, Spanish and a little Chinese she'd been studying on her down-time. She had a Ph.D. in comparative literature from a highly respected university. Apparently, academia didn't work out for her, and so she applied to the TSA. Dr. Mishenko had perished instead of published, and it seemed her goal at TSA was to make as many agents perish as possible, for as long as she was there. She had a vision for the officers at O'Hare, and she got it from Dante.

“We've decided that if an officer is caught allowing sparklers through this checkpoint, even by accident, it will be an instant Letter of Reprimand. We will be swinging for suspension and termination. Also, I've been noticing a lot of you slipping with your uniforms. Some of you have been coming in missing uniform pieces, especially nameplates. This will be an instant Letter of Counseling from now on.” In closing she flashed a little smile—a sarcastic one, as she was well aware of the impossibility of her final directive. “Now have a nice day.”

The briefing broke, Mishenko turned on her heel and did her hunch-back-shuffle into the supervisor's office to attend to paperwork, and the lead supervisor for the day, Kildare, replaced her at the front of the officer gathering. Shaunda, who had been giving me the occasional fast-

and-dirty tip On How to Survive as a TSA employee ever since I'd arrived at the checkpoint a month earlier, turned to me and gave me a piece of weary advice I would never forget.

“Sometimes the best way to stay out of trouble with this job is to just call off and keep your ass at home,” she said. She then looked me up and down and added, “And you better keep your ass out of Mishenko's sight today. You're missing your nameplate.”

I pressed my chin to my sternum in a panic, and saw that it was true: I had forgotten to clip my metal nameplate to my uniform's right breast pocket that morning. It was sitting on the dresser back at the apartment I'd just moved into, “Harrington” engraved on it, indicating the name of the guy who would be fucked if Mishenko got a good look at him. Should have kept my ass home.

Kildare called out all our names, one by one, along with which of the 10 or so security lanes we were assigned to that day, and which position we would start in on the lane rotation (the lane positions, back then, consisted of walk-thru metal detector, x-ray machine, travel document checker, and exit lane watch).

“Harrington, you're with Bennet on lane 5,” Kildare shouted. I quietly cursed.

I walked onto 5, which was teeming with a dozen early-morning shift officers desperate for us to relieve them so they could go on their lunch break. The lanes on O'Hare checkpoints were so narrow that passing a fellow officer en route to attend to a bag check meant coming nose to nose. On top of being packed in with each other on the tiny lanes, we had United Terminal's giant glass windows lining the ceiling high above our heads, which made Terminal 1 a greenhouse. Every other passenger complained about the heat, wiping sweat from his or her

brow. But most of those passengers were fortunate enough to be in summer-wear; in a full TSA uniform, many officers came close to passing out. Luckily, I didn't have to get on any of the positions that morning, as I'd been assigned to be a floater: a TSA agent free to walk around the lane, but expected to assist with every little odd job that may arise. A lackey. Pat-down here, bag check there, relieving someone who'd gotten stranded on a position due to one of the daily lane rotation failures. I busied myself with carrying bins out for the passengers—the plastic, rectangular tubs inside which you empty your pockets and place your laptop. Bin-running was the consummate busy work of the TSA checkpoint,

I was hoping for two things that day. One was to avoid being on the x-ray, since it was clear that the failure to intercept a grandmother planning to celebrate Independence Day with a sparkler would amount to termination and accusations from Mishenko of attempted murder-by-negligence. The other was to stay away from Bennett, one of the most annoying people on checkpoint 2.

Bennett was a 5-year TSA employee in his mid-twenties, just a little younger than me. A short and humorless boy with cloudy green eyes that only snapped into focus at mention of the SOP. I'd been assigned with Bennett almost every day since my OJT training period had ended a couple weeks back. Bennett had been my “mentor,” meaning he was the one in charge of shadowing me, looking over my shoulder to make sure I completed the time on each position required for certification. Bennett had come to know the TSA well enough to want out of it: his hope was to get into one of the other agencies beneath the DHS umbrella, all of which were regarded as better jobs than TSA. Border Patrol was his first choice; he wanted to head out West,

California or Arizona, to get a gig as one of the armed guards driving the length of the Mexican border looking for crossers. But he also had applications out for other positions, including Federal Air Marshal—the undercover agents who get paid to sit silently on flights, packing a gun and waiting for the chance to foil a terrorist attempt that never comes—as well as Customs right there at O'Hare, where he would be dealing with international travelers, asking if there were any plant or meat products in their suitcases and what not.

Despite my attempts to keep to myself with bin duty that day, Bennett was in my face within 10 minutes.

“Okay. So you heard about the sparklers, right?” said Bennett. This as though I hadn't been standing just a few feet away from him while Mishenko threatened our jobs. “So what's that mean? When you see a sparkler?” Bennett's approach to training me was a Socratic one, infuriating coming from such a dim-witted kid.

“Yeah yeah, I heard. We have to make sure sparklers don't get through the checkpoint,” I said.

“I'm surprised she didn't say anything about bang snaps. Maybe she forgot. But anyway, I'd watch it if I were you. See, you have to be serious, always on-point. A lot of TSA officers don't realize that. You can't go down that path. I don't want you becoming one of the *those* officers.”

From day 1 Bennett had been lecturing me on this. Warning me to stay away from the undesirable elements of the TSA workforce, *those* officers. Bennett looked soulfully into my eyes when giving these lectures, as though hoping to forge a bureaucratic romance. “Do me a

favor and tap Shaunda off the walk-thru? I need to ask her what she needs for the Fourth of July potluck.”

Taking over the walk-thru metal detector position would at least mean I could get away from Bennett, and so I was happy to do it. I walked up to the plastic archway through which people passed to enter the secure side of the Terminal, told Shaunda she was tapped, and that Bennett needed to talk to her.

“What's this pain-in-the ass boy got to say now?” Shaunda said. In leaving me in charge of the walk-thru, she gave one last piece of parting advice: “If you see a sparkler sticking out of one of these kids' pockets, you know what to do.”

I then found myself staring down a line of about two hundred unhappy airline passengers in socks, all waiting their turn to be waved through by me. I had learned that working the walk-thru amounted to watching hundreds of people's feet shuffling toward me over the course of a half hour. It was like watching the beginning of Chaplin's *Modern Times*. The automatic glance-down became instinctive, so that I began looking at people's feet everywhere, even outside the airport. After confirming they were shoeless, I looked back up to make sure the passengers' pockets weren't bulging with an obvious weapon, and listened for the *beep beep beep* of the alarm going off which indicated the passenger had too much metal on her person and had to step back out. Among the common items that most people didn't realize would set the metal detector off: packs of gum or cigarettes, candy with aluminum foil wrappers (Hershey's kisses), belts with substantial buckles, and the ultimate sneaky culprit: condoms, with their aluminum-lined packages. I once spent nearly 20 minutes with a passenger who was inexplicably setting off the

walk-thru alarm, his pockets turned out, his belt removed. He'd nearly stripped off his clothes at one point, so desperate was he to prove that he had nothing metal on his person. Just before an officer arrived to give him a pat-down to resolve the issue, the passenger began pulling the items in his wallet out, I.D. cards and the like, and a single forgotten condom from some unlucky night years ago fell to the floor. He was embarrassed, but sure enough passed through without issue after tossing out the condom. Just one would set the thing off.

The walk-thru metal detector was also a prime site of TSA pedantry. I'd had to listen to dozens of lectures while flying beneath Bennett's wing on the many nuances of running the walk-thru. At one point just a few weeks earlier, while standing at the walk-thru metal detector with Bennett right next to me, he'd gone on a particularly stultifying rant about socks.

"Personally, I have them take their socks off if they're like that," he had said. I'd just waved through a passenger with some manner of decorations on her socks, a couple little fur bells or some such, like the kind you often see near Christmas, where the sock is fashioned to look like a reindeer. Bennett didn't approve of this. The TSA rule was that all footwear had to be removed and submitted for x-ray screening before a passenger could pass through the checkpoint. It had been that way since the Richard Reid shoe bomb attempt of 2002, which panicked America especially hard, being so close on the heels of 9/11. Because of this, the scent of foot odor permeated the checkpoint. When a passenger pulled off a really old pair of shoes it was like the yawn of a zombie's ass. The entire lane of officers recoiled in unison. Often, not long after the shoes came off, the second most common scent on the checkpoint would bloom: air freshener—*shhhhhh*— the fruit-scented mist rising to mute the odor. A bottle of air

freshener sat atop the x-ray machine on every lane. The War on Terror at the airport, from a TSA officer's perspective, amounted to a nonstop battle against foot odor.

I ended up stranded on that walk-thru for about 2 hours, agonizing over the nature of people's socks and looking for sparklers sticking out of people's pockets. A lot of the veteran officers purposely left new-hires stranded on positions for hours, because no one, least of all managers or supervisors, much cared about the complaints of recent-hires. But I was eventually tapped out of the walk-thru by a kind older officer named Antoinette, and spent the rest of that day unfettered by any of the TSA positions and their accompanying dangers, mercifully free of having to perform any real duties—in other words, a relatively happy TSA agent. That is, until an officer named Frank called a bag check on the x-ray, and there were no other agents available on the lane to field it but me.

Frank was one of those nightmare x-ray operators I would learn was the bane of almost every TSA officer's existence: an operator who sees threats in every other carry-on. I walked up to Frank, seated in front of the x-ray panel, and looked over his shoulder at the screen, which he tapped with a pen.

“Hey, you think these passengers even listen to any of the advisements?” he said, tilting his head toward the agent out front of the checkpoint shouting the TSA mantra: “All liquids, gels, creams and aerosols must be out of your bag. Laptops out of your bag.” Frank operated on the premise that all passengers were dumb as sheep and well-deserving of every unpleasant thing that befell them at the hands of the TSA. Frank, in questioning the hearing ability of the passengers at O'Hare, seemed to be implying that the suitcase I was looking at on the screen,

belonging to a Hispanic lady who was nervously watching us and waiting for her bag, contained some sort of obvious and easily avoidable violation of the TSA regulations, though I saw absolutely nothing. Frank was tapping at a few wisps of orange in the mess of orange that constituted what a suitcase full of clothes looked like on our x-ray screens. But if the x-ray operator demanded a bag check, the bag checker had to play ball. A lot of the time, the TSA officer checking your luggage is even more annoyed than you are that the x-ray operator called the search.

I rummaged through the lady's bag in a half-ass manner, ignoring the meticulous TSA bag check procedure since I knew Frank had ordered a search of the woman's property for no good reason. I walked back to the x-ray to rerun the suitcase per TSA policy, telling Frank that there was nothing suspicious to be found. I then gave the woman back her Samsonite, apologizing for the inconvenience.

I turned around and Dr. Mishenko was standing one lane over, looking dead at me, leaning against one of the metal divestiture tables, arms crossed.

"Come see me in the office, Mr. Harrington," she said.

Like everything about the TSA checkpoint, the supervisor's office was cramped, dominated by a file cabinet containing the SOP and hundreds of folders stuffed with SF-71s (the forms used to fill out, among other things, requests for off time, which every TSA agent so badly needed) as well as forms for employee discipline, one of which Mishenko had in front of her. The supervisor's desk was set against a wall, so that instead of sitting down in front of her on

some sort of equal human plane, one had to stand behind her or off to the side while getting reprimanded. Mishenko had long hair which she tied up per TSA's rule that officers' hair was not to fall beneath the shoulder line, a rule which she loved to harp on more than any other supervisor. But the thing was, *Mishenko's* hairdo often came undone over the course of constantly shuffling around to catch agents in the act of SOP violations. Female officers whispered about this fact in diatribes on the subject of Mishenko's hypocrisy. I remember that as I stood there with my head on the chopping block, terrified I was about to be told I'd lost my job just seven weeks in, all I could focus on were a few strands of Mishenko's brunette hair that had fallen out of her chignon and spilled down below her shoulder line.

“Mr. Harrington,” she finally said. “In your training for this job, were you or were you not instructed to always unroll the passengers' socks and thoroughly inspect them when doing bag checks?”

Our TSA trainers had, in fact, told us that among the many procedural points that had to be touched when doing the average bag check was unrolling the passengers' socks and patting them down to make sure there wasn't, for instance, a shock tube detonator rolled inside for use in an improvised explosive device. I could lie and say no, I hadn't been instructed to unroll socks, but I knew Mishenko would love nothing more than to spend half a day hunting down Marcus and Chet to interview them and catch me in the lie.

“Yes, they told us about unrolling socks,” I confessed. “But Frank wasn't pointing to the socks on the x-ray screen when he called me over for the bag check.”

“Mr. Harrington, it does not matter what the x-ray operator is or isn't pointing to. There is a standard operating procedure, and part of it is unrolling socks and properly patting them in the event that you discover the passenger has balled up her socks, like that woman out there. I'm guessing you're of the opinion that unrolling socks and patting them down is not a big deal?”

I tried to assure her that I understood the importance of sock-unrolling, but she cut me off, stood up and walked over to the filing cabinet. She pulled a small cardboard box out of a drawer, blue with a spiky splash of orange meant to represent an explosion. On the box were the words SUPER LOUD BANG! in Comic Sans. She placed it on her metal desk.

“You're familiar with bang snaps, I presume?” she said, opening up the box. She reached inside and pulled out a handful of snaps. I couldn't deny it: I was familiar with bang snaps. The little mini-pouches of silver fulminate ubiquitous around the Fourth of July, which you throw at the ground to detonate, or, if you remember your childhood days, at the ground around the feet of friends or enemies. The thing with bang snaps, according to Mishenko, was that a terrorist could take a lot of them, combine them, and, as with sparkler bombs, form one giant bang snap that could theoretically blow a hole in the side of a plane and wreak some serious terror. Allowing even one of these tadpole-sized kiddie explosives to pass through the checkpoint was unacceptable. Peering at me over the rims of her giant glasses, Mishenko asked me whether or not I would be able to tell the difference between a pile of socks inside of which were a few bang snaps, and a pile of socks inside of which there were no bang snaps.

I told her I wasn't sure.

“That is why you must unroll socks even if the x-ray operator doesn't tell you to. You have threatened the lives of hundreds of airline passengers,” she said as she finished filling out my write-up. ”This is a Letter of Counseling. I'll spare you the Letter of Reprimand. But if you want to keep this job, Mr. Harrington, you'd better start doing things properly. And don't think I didn't notice that your nameplate is missing. I'll be calling you in here later today so we can talk about that. I'm running through these write-up sheets faster than D.C. can print them.”

I spent the rest of that shift in a daze, shaken by my first nasty encounter with Mishenko. The fear of getting fired by the TSA, that little ball of nausea I would come to know so well, pulsed in my gut. I hated Mishenko right then, yes, but I was just as angry at myself, not only for failing to better watch my ass, as Shaunda had advised, but also for having arrived at a place in life where my rent money was contingent upon taking bang snaps from children and inspecting balled-up socks.

The feeling that I wasn't really cut out for a TSA uniform was reinforced after work each day during the journey home to my apartment. By then, with a few paychecks stashed away, I had managed to move out of my father's house and find myself a spot in what was essentially a rundown youth hostel on North and Western Avenue. I lived right on the border between Bucktown and Humboldt Park. Many of my neighbors were among the last Hispanic holdouts from the gentrification pushing its way west into Puerto Rican Humboldt Park. To get home I

had to contend with crowds of the trendy and painfully cool. White people with just enough money to pretend not to have it.

Past the nightlife nexus formed by Damen, North and Milwaukee Avenue I walked each day, pushing through throngs of young people waiting outside punk and hip hop clubs. It seemed as though I belonged with the unruly crowd, not spending my days asserting absurd authority over them. I was working weekends at that point—only officers with a lot of seniority managed to get weekends off—and so on Saturday nights I felt like a cop walking through Woodstock: the hum of folk music, the roar of metal, and every musical form in between accompanied crowds of kids with aviator sunglasses and strategically torn jeans. They did double-takes at me, with the Transportation Security Administration logo on my sleeves and one-stripe epaulets on my shoulders. Most TSA officers refused to wear their uniforms outside of the airport for fear of being attacked by bitter passengers they'd dealt with in the past, or by anti-government fanatics who hated what the TSA represented. Smart TSA officers changed out of their uniforms in the airport bathroom right after clocking out, a practice I would soon adopt. But I rushed to get home and out of that uniform for more reasons than just basic survival: being clearly identifiable as the guy who pats down asses and confiscates bottled water at the airport is tragically uncool. I imagined my fellow youths whispering after I passed: *There goes The Man, the authority. There goes the worst kind of thing to be.*

Even if I hadn't been keeping my head bowed for shame, I would have been glancing at people's feet anyway, as the TSA's No Shoes Rule had programmed me to look down. On the stroll down North Avenue were the combat boots of girls in light skirts and black makeup. Heels,

wedges, the occasional clogs. The moccasins of clubbers dressed like Barbarella, en route to some theme night. Doc Martens on the punk kids walking east toward the No Exit club. Espadrilles on young women pushing baby carriages. Converses beneath the folded cuffs of hipsters' skinny jeans. Crocs, crocs, crawling along: all the rage that summer, the hideous things. White New Balances springing on by, followed by the *scritch- scratch scritch-scratch* of a leashed lap dog. Thick-soled boots of the city workers. And finally, every now and then, just as I reached the intersection of Western and North Avenue, I would see the feet of the Beggar Who Wore No Shoes. His toenails blackened by the street grime, one foot wrapped in a bandage, he'd weave unsteadily among the cars as they waited at the red light, holding a sign—"please help"—proffering a plastic cup to driver's side windows.

The only time I was sure to look up on my journey home was the moment I passed the neighborhood liquor store, Crespo's, owned and run by two Dominican brothers and their friends.

The walk of shame continued into the junk-strewn vestibule of my slummy building. The old Rican man who smoked cigars on the stoop of the brownstone across the street probably thought I was a city or state authority coming to condemn the place the first time he saw me.

Up the dusty wooden staircase that led to my third-floor apartment I'd go, the steps wobbly and loose between the treads. Styrofoam cups and empty packs of cigarettes crunched and crinkled beneath my government-issue shoes. The musty stairwell was often completely dark at night, as the single exposed light bulb sometimes burnt out and no one—least of all the

landlord, a manic Colombian man named Restrepo—cared enough to do anything about it for weeks on end.

The walls of our third-floor living room were painted 6 different colors, including green, brown and purple. The paint was chipped and peeling all over, betraying snatches of phrases from graffiti of years past. The furniture had all been collected from nearby dumpsters, and the place smelled like it. It was the sort of apartment you see in newspaper articles detailing heroin busts. I was spending my days enforcing rules and regulations on behalf of the government while living in a place with enough housing code violations to keep a city inspector at her clipboard for days. The place should have been condemned, but we were all young and most of us were up to no good, so no one wanted to bring the authorities into the picture.

Of my three roommates, I was closest to Neal, a gentle, graying white dude in his late-thirties who was to be found each night, and sometimes early morning, standing on the back porch, beer in hand, barefoot in cargo shorts. He never had a job in the six years I lived with him, and his income was a mystery. The only solid background information I ever got on Neal was that his father had worked in a rocket propulsion lab at NASA back in the '60s and '70s, and had brought home pretty good bread. Neal was in the early stages of a midlife crisis. Looking back, I shudder to think how we, a group of 20-somethings, with our insufferable, youthful passions and irrational exuberance, must have made it even worse for Neal. He was as chill as they came, though. Neal often drew comparisons to the Dude of Lebowsky fame. He would emerge from his room abutting our rundown kitchen in late afternoon, crack a beer and casually talk about his encyclopedic knowledge of 1950s and '60s science fiction films. Neal was the rock of the

flophouse: the cast of roommates and neighbors would constantly change over my six years of living there, with many move-ins staying less than 2 weeks after realizing what a shithole the place was, but Neal never budged. Neal's prior roommate had also been a TSA employee. From the moment I moved in Neal was the sympathetic ear awaiting me at the end of the day to hear my stories about the airport.

“Jason,” Neal said one night as I sat down around the kitchen island counter, the traditional gathering place of the apartment, “My last roommate in Colorado worked at the TSA, Denver International, and he used to come home every night saying how much he absolutely,” Neal extended his hand table-wise to emphasize points after pauses, “*hated* it. He said it felt like going into work in a clown suit each day.” That was true.

On the night of the Fourth of July, 2007, my roommates, along with some of the residents from the first and second floors, pulled a wobbly old ladder out from the basement and set it up on our third-floor porch, so that we could climb up to the roof. Just because I wasn't drinking didn't mean I couldn't mingle with the party a little, take in the view and the fireworks. The one good thing the flophouse had was a hell of a rooftop view, though getting up there was dangerous business. After climbing the rickety ladder and trying not to look down at the three-story drop, you got to the canted eave of the roof, which you had to carefully shimmy up, staying low. If, in crawling up this incline, you lost your balance just a little, you would roll down the tar-papered eave and plunge thirty feet to the pavement below. The possibility of death hung over every rooftop party at the flophouse, and we loved it. Excitement depends on the absence of security. That night there were dozens of people set up in camps sitting on buckets and lawn

chairs, and dozens more lined up along the rooftop's ledges, swigging from bottles and smoking joints.

“What would be the best way for me to get weed on a plane?” asked a party girl wearing a feather chain headband and a summer dress.

Neal had hung his huge speakers out below us on the porch, connected to the desktop in his room, so that the girl and I had to shout over the soundtrack of Neal's youth: the Stones, Velvet Underground, The Smiths. I had worked that day, an uneventful shift. The actual days on which holidays fall are relatively quiet at the airport. It's the days leading up to them that are busy. I was determined not to drink so as to keep my several months of sobriety going strong. But because I had arrived during the early stages of the party in full TSA get-up, my fate had been sealed. I would spend the night as the go-to guy for questions concerning airport security, a role that made self-medication tempting.

“We don't look for weed. Actually, our supervisors tell us to ignore drugs if we see it,” I shouted. I wanted badly to ask the girl for a slug of whatever was in that cup she was holding. She was cute, and talking to a cute girl at a party is nerve-racking enough even *with* alcohol; being sober and forced to flirt via sensitive security information was almost intolerable. I tried to compensate for my apparent lack of coolness by focusing on one thing: I was going to make this girl like me by helping her smuggle weed onto an airplane. It was the first of many such theoretical plans to which I would act as advisor over the years.

“The only thing to worry about would be drug-sniffing dogs,” I went on. “I think coffee beans mask the scent of marijuana pretty nicely. I'd say take your stash, open a bag of coffee

beans, put the stash in the bag, then reseal it. There'd be no reason for us to open a bag of coffee on the checkpoint.”

“Cool. Thanks,” she said.

“The coffee,” I continued, “would have to set off the Explosive Trace Detector for us to even consider opening it, and we’re of course not dealing with explosives here,” I said, motioning around the weed-scented scene. “Both coffee and weed look orange on the x-ray screen, so there would be absolutely no way to see that there was something else in there with the coffee.”

I remember she had a distant, glazed look in her eye at that point, beyond that which would be expected.

“But I'm not like a cop or anything,” I shouted, making one last attempt to save myself. “I mostly police feet, really.”

She walked away.

As the city's main fireworks show got underway, I settled on a parapet next to Neal. We watched starbursts shower the Chicago skyline as he slugged beers from a mini-cooler and I fought the temptation to ask for one. After the grand finale Kate from the first floor, a quiet brunette who worked some nonprofit gig by day and pursued her passion, fire-twirling, by night, brought her poi up to the rooftop by popular request. She was soon the center of a circle of partygoers. Finally, we had ourselves a real circus on that rooftop. She swung her fire-wicked chains like a kung-fu dancer, setting the air ablaze with infinity symbols and Mobius strips—*whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*. We watched the girl, the beautiful blaze, and pined. The air was alive

with the smell of butane, weed and burning leaves from a bonfire someone had started in the backyard below.

Some shaggy-headed dude, a former resident of the flophouse who had just gotten out of jail and had asked me and Neal several times about the possibility of moving back in, walked the ledge like a tightrope, beer in hand, daring the 30-foot drop to take him. Former residents of the building came up to me and Neal all night—people in their late twenties and early thirties who had done their time in the flophouse and moved on, for the most part, to better things, including Marty, a forty-something with the swagger of a young Jack Nicholson. He told of a time he'd been up on that roof during once such party years back—he had lived in the very same room I was in back then—and seen a drunken kid fall over the side. Ended up with two broken legs, lucky bastard. Another former resident told the story of someone who had overdosed on heroin and died on the second floor. It was the first flophouse ghost I would learn of.

A friend of Marty's named Greg also drifted over to Neal and me. He had lived at the flophouse in his early twenties, addicted to coke; now he was nearing thirty and had gotten it all together. His blonde fiancé was at his side. I remember he surveyed the bacchanalia spread out along that rooftop with a smug air, smoking an occasional cigarette. He looked at Neal and me with pity when we told him we were current residents of the halfway house he had long since left behind. When he asked me what I did to make rent, I told him.

“TSA? Really? We had a run-in with them a few months ago on our way to Belize.” He squeezed his fiancé shoulder. “Wow. So you're an actual TSA officer. Let me ask you something: do you think you're making anyone safer, with what you do each day?”

It seemed this was some kind of test. It was obvious what his opinion on the matter was.

“No. Absolutely not,” I told him. “It's not really making anyone safer.”

I felt as though I'd come out. It seemed to catch him by surprise; seemed he'd been expecting me to hold the line with the organization, spout all that stuff about how I was just serving as one of many layers protecting the homeland.

“Yeah. I agree. That's good. Good you realize that,” he said.

“They took a bottle of champagne from me,” his fiancé put in. “The officer was a real asshole about it too.”

We talked, Greg, his fiancé and I, about the strange, often paradoxical nature of airline security. The absurdity of a TSA officer confiscating a bottle of champagne from two people on their way to Belize on the pretense that the champagne could be nitroglycerin in disguise, intended for use in an improvised explosive device, and then tossing it in a trash can right there on the checkpoint without ever testing it. Though I didn't know then that experts had a name for what we were discussing—security theater—I did know that I found it interesting, that I loved talking about it, and that I felt, for the first time that night, as though I didn't need alcohol to make the conversation flow smoothly. And so since it seemed as though I didn't need alcohol anymore, I decided it would be fine to accept the beer that Greg, my newfound fellow traveler in the way of homeland security skepticism, offered me from the mini-cooler he and his fiancé had brought up to the roof.

Next morning I only made it to the curb in front of the flophouse before collapsing. I'd slugged my last beer, probably my 14th or 15th, just a few hours before. I wore a stained white tee and my work pants, my TSA shirt slung over-shoulder. I had decided I would try to sleep on the train, dunk my head in a washroom sink at O'Hare for a few minutes, empty a bottle of Tic Tacs in my mouth, change into my TSA shirt and power through the day. But I was still drunk—the kind of morning drunk that swaps out the pleasure of intoxication for pounding terror and pain—and there beneath the searing July sun, watching the morning commuter crowd walk by, listening to the hard rumble of buses and trucks, 8 long hours of fussing over socks stretched before me like a Boschian landscape, I knew I couldn't be a part of that, couldn't put on that uniform.

“Sometimes the best way to stay out of trouble with this job is to just call off and keep your ass at home,” Shaunda's words came back. So I pulled out my cellphone, dialed the TSA call-off line, picked myself up off the curb and went back up the creaky stairs, where, among the crumpled bodies of passed-out partygoers, I sat drinking a cold one I found way in the back of the fridge.

CHAPTER FIVE
PLAYING THE PART, ACTING BADLY

I COULD see the life expectancy of frustrated parents declining as they stood in the mile-long passenger lines, boiling in the greenhouse heat of Terminal 1. Mothers and fathers presided like generals over their little troops, veins bulging, ordering shoes off and demanding compliance. *Stop pretending to shoot a machine gun, Billy, you're gonna' get us all arrested. Christ.* I saw marital spats detonate on the checkpoint with such ferocity it seemed as though the divorce would be final before the plane touched down. Friends turned on each other, sisters mocked brothers as they got patted down, cats escaped carriers and service dogs strained leashes in response.

Passengers had trouble dealing with the hassles sober. They made a beeline to the Chili's bar after getting through security, or showed up preemptively sloshed, numbed to the great stressor that is any Category X airport. Many came in wobble-walking from hangovers, quietly determined to get to a Bloody Mary as soon as possible—the same state I found myself in many mornings. Luckily, I wasn't the only agent screening the previous night's overindulgence with fistfuls of Certs and splashes of cologne. Calling off every time we woke up drunk would have meant quitting for many of us, and so we had to learn to *slide under the radar*, as officers liked to say.

One morning I woke up next to a capsized can of beer, face-down on a soggy-sour pillow, just 2 hours before the 1 P.M. start of my shift. I'd spent the previous night drinking with Neal until well past 6 in the morning, having failed to abstain from a party thrown by Ferrari, a black painter dude downstairs who had a sort of artist's commune going on. I'd promised myself I wouldn't risk even a sip, but as the throb of reggae beat against the wood floor of my bedroom, a knock came on my door. It was Neal. A few partygoers had strayed up onto our third floor, taking refuge from the party proper, including two hipster girls named Daria and Nicole. Turned out they had a formidable knowledge of cinema, and Neal wanted me to connect my laptop to the TV and stream them one of my foreign films. I felt silly, sitting there watching *Repulsion*, the only one not drinking in this chic gathering. I figured the occasion called for just one or two, which of course led to 20, a few lines of coke and, apparently, me collapsing in my bed, beer still in-hand. I was unfit for duty, but I'd called off one too many times recently, so I stumbled into the shower, threw on my uniform, and hopped on the Blue Line for a painful ride that ended with me standing dazed in the briefing circle. Terminal 1 was the harshest in O'Hare when hungover. The sparse, cavernous steel architecture gave one the feeling of being an ill plaything caught in the world of some giant's erector set. A 40-foot tall brachiosaurus skeleton towered off to the side of the checkpoint, on loan from the Field Museum. Its tiny head reached the glass ceiling's arches, its fiberglass tail swept over the United customer service counter. We often told passengers to take their questions to the dinosaur.

On top of the searing headache and the woozy feeling, I knew the managers were watching me: a few days earlier I'd failed an internal bomb test when an officer disguised as a

vacationing passenger in a Hawaiian shirt slipped a suitcase with a fake explosive device through my x-ray machine. Manager Marty and a clipboard-wielding test record keeper came over to pull me off the x-ray and talk to me.

“OK what are you doing here?” Marty looked at my name badge. “Jason. You’re not looking at the screen is what you’re doing. You gotta’ be analyzing those images.”

Marty was a small, vaguely Hispanic man whose parted hair was the calmest thing about him. Forever fidgeting, shifting his weight from one shoe to the other, adjusting his tie in a wired-up frenzy. Rumor had it his spastic mien was powered by lines of cocaine snorted throughout the day in the manager’s office and in the bathrooms—a rumor I couldn’t buy. I’d snorted enough coke in my life to know the first line wasn’t something you did unless you were ready to devote an entire day and night, at least, to tending the rollercoaster.

“You’re de-certified from the x-ray,” he went on. “Yeah we gotta’ de-certify you, man. I know. But we gotta’ do it.”

Sometimes Marty couldn’t be bothered with waiting for a response from whomever he was reprimanding, so he ended up addressing ghost objections and questions.

“I was an officer for 4 years, I know it’s rough with so many bags coming across your screen, but you gotta’ stop on each one. Use those enhance buttons. Clear clutter. We’ll have someone shadow you. Who was your mentor?”

“Bennett,” I said. Right away I knew I should have lied.

“Bennett. Great officer. No, this don’t mean you’re gonna’ lose your job. Not yet. We’ll get you back with Bennett until you get your shit straight.”

So for a few days prior to the *Repulsion* mishap I had been back under the wing of Bennett. It looked to be a day of hiding my liquor-sick state from passengers, supervisors, and a constantly fussing Bennett. But then the supervisor's assistant—the Lead Supervisor, Peluso—called out everyone's lane assignment after Mishenko's briefing, per routine.

“Harrington! We have a problem here,” Peluso said as he looked over the manning sheet on his clipboard. I knew it couldn't be a real problem; Peluso's supervisory calls always fell in the service of making everyone's life easier. A short man with a shiny bald head and a raspy voice, Peluso shouted to express the full spectrum of emotions—if Peluso was happy, he shouted about it. Contemplative, he shouted. Angry, he shouted and jumped up and down.

“We need to find someone to shadow you for the day,” Peluso continued. “Bennett's on collateral duty.”

Sometimes Bennett got pulled off the floor to attend to extracurricular TSA activities—moratoriums on socks versus no socks, or whatever. I never bothered to ask. All I knew was that I loved it when Bennett was missing.

Peluso strafed the circle of agents with his gaze, finally settling on go-to officer for everything.

“Shaunda!” he said, “Shadow Harrington.”

“Can't do it, boss. I'm on OLC today. I was supposed to go two weeks ago.”

“Oh *come on!* You're killing me. Can't you do OLC tomorrow?”

“Mishenko said I could do it tomorrow, yesterday. No can do boss.”

Officers were always having their scheduled online learning center time snatched away from them due to personnel shortages, so any TSO could claim she was busy with overdue OLC on any given day. Shaunda just pulled the OLC line out because she didn't want to have to watch both my and her ass on the x-ray. She probably sensed, even back then, that I was hopeless in the way of being a good officer.

“Ah, fuck it,” Peluso said, looking up from the clipboard. “We'll just put you with Marco. Not like he's ever doing shit anyway. Marco!”

More than anything, Peluso liked to shout at, and about, Marco. When Marco came up missing, or when reports surfaced that Marco had single-handedly fucked up the lane rotation by taking an extra break to flirt with a female employee down at the Sunglass Hut, Peluso would let forth a *Dennis the Menace* roar—*Marcooooo!*—and tromp down the concourse, pulling Marco's shoulder halfway out of its socket, dragging him back like a runaway dog. But behind Peluso's tornadic chiding was a barely suppressed smile. I think now that Peluso actually loved Marco. In his younger days, Peluso had probably been a Marco himself. He'd be misbehaving right alongside him if he could, but the shackles of middle age and mortgages made it impossible.

“Get the hell over here!” Peluso shouted, having spotted his man. “You're mentoring Harrington today.”

Marco orbited the checkpoint like a naughty federal Pluto. That afternoon he was just beyond the edge of our workspace, over by the B gate passenger seating, talking to a curly haired United girl. Marco came ambling over to Peluso and me, his federal-issue pants sagging, hair combed up Wolverine-style, as always, in bold disregard for the SOP's strictures on unusual

hairstyles. I'd heard a lot of by-the-book agents deriding Marco's work ethic and questioning his dedication to the job. He seemed like my kind of officer. But if Marco didn't know he could trust you, he ignored you. So up to that point we'd only exchanged a few work-related words.

"I gotta' mentor him?" Marco said, looking me up and down. "You're playing right, Peluso? Come *on*. Do you really want *me* mentoring anyone?"

"Shut up and do it, Marco. Bennett's on collateral duty and Shaunda's on OLC."

It was Peluso's poetic way of torturing Marco, forcing him into the role of babysitter for a day as punishment for being precisely the kind of employee who most needed babysitting.

"This is bullshit," Marco grumbled as I followed him over to the x-ray machine, where I was up first. "It's 'cause of the hair, isn't it, Peluso?" he asked over his shoulder, but Peluso was long gone, on to other checkpoint problems. "It's 'cause of the hair," he decided as I settled in front of the x-ray.

Marco pulled up a chair at my side. We sat in silence for a couple minutes as I tried to punch my user password into the x-ray. I messed up the long string of digits several times, with my trembling hands.

"You're still drunk, aren't you?" Marco asked.

I froze. Didn't dare turn to him to answer. Kept my face toward the screen. Anything to avoid giving him another whiff of my breath. All I knew was that Marco wasn't happy about having to mentor me. He probably wished I would disappear right then. An anonymous tip to Mishenko that I smelled like a brewery would certainly remove me from the checkpoint floor.

"No, I had a few last night but—"

He laughed. He knew me already.

“A few? That don’t smell like a few, homie.” Marco had a lisp that emerged when he spoke fast, so that his smells became thmells. Marco was Croatian, but had lost most of the accent years ago. He only pulled out his native tongue when a non-English speaking female passenger came through on her way to Zagreb, lost in the security process. Otherwise, he affected an urban patois, addressing everyone as “homie.” This urban image was reinforced by a gold herringbone chain he wore around his neck, which could be seen peeking out, along with tufts of chest hair, from his unbuttoned TSA shirt.

“Me, I didn’t even go home after the club last night. I keep my uniform in my car. I’m thinking about taking a couple shots at lunch or something, keep me going.”

I stopped the x-ray belt, turned to him.

“I was in the shower for 30 minutes. Brushed my teeth twice. You can still smell it?”

“Not your breath. It comes out your pores.”

I never imagined the term *alcohol coming out of the pores* could apply to me. Somehow, I thought that my precautionary measures would always defeat such clichés, but here it was coming out of Marco's mouth, and apparently out of me.

“We gotta’ stay away from Mishenko, that’s for sure. And Marty.”

Marco spent the next 30 minutes giving me the lowdown on surviving the checkpoint when hungover. The most important thing was that, contrary to what they told us in training, management almost never breathalyzed us, no matter how obviously unfit for duty we were. Random drug and alcohol screening at O’Hare took place between November and March, like

clockwork. They called the testing team in the day after Super Bowl Sunday, and kept them around for a few months, just to fulfill O'Hare's federal requirements.

Beneath the clown persona, Marco was shrewd. In any thankless, boring workplace, employees have second images of themselves, doppelgängers running laps around the imagination all day. In Marco's mind, he was a future lawyer, always swearing he was *this* close to leaving TSA for law school. Just getting the applications in order, was all. Never mind that he still didn't have a bachelor's—he'd dropped out of UIC with a few credits left to go. His TSA philosophy hinged on maximal coverage of the ass. For several weeks, I was Grasshopper to Marco's punk Master Po. Finally, after weeks of sleep-inducing facts from Bennett on the difference between permissible and non-permissible Leatherman tools, I was getting some practical information that would actually help me on the job. Marco, seeing I was a promising young federal derelict, began volunteering to shadow me on days when Bennett wasn't around.

One day Marco noticed I had spent a whole minute agonizing over an on-screen roller bag.

“What are you doing?” he asked

“Making sure there's no TIPS in here.”

He laughed.

“You ain't doing it right, homie.”

When we ran the x-ray, the machines occasionally superimposed fictional threats on the screen, so that in the parade of images there would appear a Trojan surprise: inside a real image

of a cluttered suitcase there would be, say, a fictional knife. It was the x-ray operator's duty at that point to spot the simulated weapon and press a button labeled THREAT on the x-ray console, at which time a message would appear that said, "You have correctly identified a fictional threat." This was the Threat Image Projection system, TIPS, the TSA's way of making sure we were paying attention on the x-ray. Bennett had spent hours barraging me with fine-grain advice on how to maximize my TIPS score. Before I met Marco, every image that came across my screen was a mini-crisis for me.

"Just hit threat. Just hit threat on every image that looks at all suspicious, don't even waste time analyzing," Marco said over-shoulder. "It's almost impossible to get in real trouble for over-tipping. If anyone asks you why you TIP so much, your defense is you're just being cautious."

The most important thing was to watch the faces of the passengers who were standing in your line. Co-workers came through with covert tests at least once a day. It was usually an agent from another checkpoint, so the more officers you got to know around the airport, the better you were at spotting a testers' face out in the passenger crowds. If you recognized an officer out there holding a suitcase, plain-clothed, you knew a test bag was about to pass through your x-ray tunnel. At that point, you called a bag check on damn near everything, whether you saw something questionable in it or not.

Every now and then you got lucky with an easy-to-spot coworker, like Sonny.

Sonny was Marco's primary accomplice, the two white-shirted wizards of checkpoint 1's dark side. Spiky-haired Sonny got her nickname from her mode of transportation to and from the

airport each day. When she'd been hired on back in '02, she showed up to the training center on a Harley. Someone dubbed her Sonny on the spot, after Sonny Barger, founder of the Hell's Angels. Sonny's covert tests were easy to catch because she would *pssst* you and give you the heads up that she was about to slip a fake bomb in your x-ray. This was keeping with Sonny's determination to subvert the entire TSA system and take all the passengers down with her. It was her conviction that the TSA wanted its agents to coddle the passengers. If Sonny had her way, she'd be allowed to bring her gun to work and pull whiny passengers into little dark rooms.

"Look at them out there. Cattle," Sonny would quietly muse, eyeing the sea of passengers as she stood guard at the metal detector. She held special contempt for the crowds of Chinese passengers en route to Beijing.

"Raptops out of your bags! You take raptops out, now, now!" she would shout, in crude imitation of a Chinese accent.

Sometimes Sonny's shouting would cause Mishenko to look up from the paperwork on her supervisor's desk. Marco would toss Sonny a heads up—"Watch it, Mishenko"—and the "raptops" would change back to laptops, Sonny's commands suddenly prefaced with "please." Such cooperation was essential when having fun with the passengers. If you got a few fellow travelers working together, you could turn a miserable TSA day into a party.

"Que numero, homies?" Marco would call across the checkpoint if no supervisors or Bennett-like lackeys were around. The call usually went up in response to a young female passenger coming through the metal detector. Officers would stop in the middle of whatever they were doing—suitcases set down, pat-downs put on pause—to glance up and partake in an out-of-

order elementary Spanish lesson. *Cinco, Ocho, Seis, Cuatro*, the opinions would come in as the girl walked barefoot to her luggage. Eventually I found out that every TSA checkpoint had a local code for judging female passenger attractiveness. Marco's just happened to be the dumbest I would ever come across. The "Que numero?" was Marco's way, cleverly coded within the lost language of *Spanish*, of asking the code-friendly officers on the checkpoint their opinions of How Hot, on a Scale from One to Ten, Was the Female Passenger Who Just Walked Through the Metal Detector, to which a chorus of male officers (and the occasional female officer, like Sonny) would respond with their opinions, disguised as *uno* through *diez*.

Peluso was the only supervisor I ever heard, back in the early days, issue any sort of reprimand for such passenger objectification.

"Marco, quit it with the goddamned 'que numero' thing," Peluso said to Marco one day after a flyer came through in a short skirt. "We're already on the ACLU's shit list. You're gonna' get us in the papers again."

"Oh come on, Peluso. You know she was hot. Wha'd you expect? You saw her."

Peluso was busying himself with recording the throughput numbers off the digital screen on top of the metal detector.

"Come on, Peluso. Admit it. She was hot," Marco pressed.

Though Peluso's back was turned to us, his bulging cheeks betrayed a smile.

"It doesn't matter how hot she may or may not have been, Marco. You can't be an idiot about it. That's the problem. You're a goddamned idiot about things."

I realize now, of course, that many of those female passengers knew exactly what we were doing. They were simply too worried about catching their flights to bother with a formal sexual harassment charge. I wish I could say that at some point one of the women gave it right back to us after hearing her number called out—squinted at our name plates, then back to our faces, running their eyes over our bodies.

“Harington, *eres cinco.*” Then, to Marco, “*Eres seis. Pendejo.*” Or maybe in Mandarin, so only the Beijing-bound could understand. But I never saw anyone receive such comeuppance from a female passenger. Marco knew, too, that his flimsy Que Numero system wasn't really fooling anyone. The TSA culture was the real wall behind which we operated, and so our thinly coded malfeasance settled into the cracks and corners of the daily routine, until it became ambient noise.

But back then I was happy to have found Marco and Sonny, those local leaders of the faction of TSA employees who'd had their fingers crossed when swearing the oath up in the airport's rotunda—

I do solemnly swear that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic...that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion... So help me God.

—a religion that Marco and Sonny didn't believe in. The enemies were all domestic as far as they were concerned: the leads and supervisors with the extra stripes on their shoulders. If a terrorist made it to the airport, it was already too late. No amount of rummaging around in a suitcase or advising a terrorist of the need for a pat-down would foil a serious plot. The whole

idea was to evade our superiors, the real devils of the floor, and have as much fun as possible while doing it.

“Bet I can get her phone number,” Marco said to Sonny one day as she ran the x-ray belt. She kept the x-ray moving as we looked down the conveyor belt to a female passenger standing in front of the rollers, waiting for her suitcase. She wore denim shorts and black-rimmed glasses, a jumbo-sized travel backpack on the floor next to her. Flying Lufthansa, probably. One of those lucky college girls who made a connection at Munich and then went on to a month or two exploring here, or there.

“Yeah?” said Sonny. “No way. Even Mr. Marco the Pimp can’t pull that. She looks smart.”

Marco went over and talked to the girl as she gathered her belongings, his gaze dipping briefly as she bent over to put her shoes back on. After a few minutes Marco walked over to the ETD machine, inside which we placed the little strip of cloth after swabbing passengers’ hands. He pushed a button to feed out a slip of paper. The ETD machines essentially printed out receipts, though instead of items in dollar value it displayed how much TNT or C4 it detected. Marco pulled a pen from his breast pocket.

“He did not. No way,” Sonny said. She’d stopped running her x-ray just to watch Marco and the girl. The passenger line backed up even farther.

“Looks like it.” I said.

“I can’t believe it.” Sonny seemed genuinely hurt.

Marco came back, glancing around to make sure Mishenko or Marty hadn't seen the transaction.

"You got it?" Sonny asked.

"Sorta'."

"You either got it or you didn't. You wrote her number down, right?"

"I got her Facebook. She goes to UIC."

"Ah, that doesn't count! You didn't get it," Sonny taunted

"You don't understand. You need to sign up for a Facebook."

"Didn't get it," Sonny insisted.

"Facebook is just as good as the phone number. Sometimes I don't even ask for the number. I see if they have a Facebook page, first. It's like Myspace but way better, because usually it's a smart college girl. I can see her pictures, see what she's into. You get the phone number from there."

"He's gonna' *email* her. You hear this? He got the email," Sonny said to me.

I had a Facebook account too—had started one the year before, in 2006, sitting at a Columbia College Chicago library computer next to someone who'd assured me it was the best way to network with classmates—and I knew Marco was right. Middle-aged Sonny wasn't plugged into the implications here. The passenger was almost definitely a college student, either well-traveled or on her way to being so. She was beautiful, and could probably talk books with me ("Let's read Kundera in Prague!") in a way that Marco certainly couldn't. Why did *he* get to friend her? Marco slipped the ETD printout in his wallet, and I began to see that the lines of

passengers streaming around us could be more than just potential security threats and headaches. Really, if you thought about it in just the right way, flirtation was probably *good* for national security. How could the suits expect officers—especially the hungover ones—to stay alive amid the mundane onslaught of thousands of harmless faces and suitcases if we didn't find some way to spice things up? There had to be some motivation to pull one's self out of bed, keep a sharp eye on all the passengers, and pleasing Mishenko and Bennett with a sparkler catch on the Fourth didn't cut it. The women got in on it too, though usually not as crudely as *que numero*.

Rhonda's opinions on attractive men were vocalized at a volume second only to her opinions on the latest headlines involving George W. Bush. She hated our ultimate supervisor with such fervor I was sure she would get canned for expressing political stances while in uniform. Oddly, it was her on-the-job gushing over Obama a year later that would land her in hot water. When Rhonda saw a male passenger she found attractive, she would ask questions under the pretense of ascertaining crucial flight information, then go on to ask about whether the tattoo on his muscular forearm had hurt when he got it, what he did for a living, where he lived. Were his eyes real, or were they contacts? DMX was Rhonda's greatest goal.

"He comes through here a lot," she said one day. "He's really nice, too. Stood over by American Bagel signing autographs for an hour a few months ago. That bald head, those muscles..."

She left it at a smile and a shake of the head.

Back at the flophouse Trey, Neal and I sat around the kitchen island counter after work one night. My old buddy Trey had landed a job, unsurprisingly, working security for a contractor, so he sometimes stopped by on his way home to the South Side after getting off, still in uniform. We were two shiny-headed, black security guards facing each other down at the drinking counter, swapping workday stories, with Neal looking on like a tipsy referee.

“At least they give you breaks. My job doesn’t even give any breaks besides lunch. That’s illegal ain’t it” Trey asked.

“Yeah, it is,” Neal put in. He was all for worker’s rights, though he didn’t have a job and his income was still a mystery. “You can sue them, man.”

”Well at least you get to just stand around,” I countered. “No worrying about missing a fake or real gun on the x-ray. No people to pat down.”

Trey’s security company usually assigned him to Home Depot, where his only real duty was to glance at customers’ receipts as they exited the store.

“Yeah but all the girls know I’m just working a lame-ass bootleg security company. You’re federal, man. That’s real. National security. Girls like national security. I mean, you’ve been getting phone numbers and shit, of course.”

I paused. Trey pounced on it.

“*Are you shitting me?* You haven’t messed with any of those airport girls yet? Besides that 17-year-old or whatever?”

“It’s not that easy. The supervisors and managers are out to screw us any way they can. We’re always on-camera.”

“Well of course you gotta’ be slick about it. But *still*. You gotta’ be a lame to not pull a girl out of that situation.”

Trey and I had grown up steeped in machismo hip hop culture, where the value of any given endeavor was directly proportional to the amount of sex and hard-posturing that could be derived from it. Back then I still hadn’t realized the degree to which I’d been conditioned by this system. Accusations from Trey of a failure to live up to the Player Standard still sent me scrambling, panicked to find an excuse.

“I’ve only been on the checkpoint floor for 3 months. Give me some time and I’ll pull a passenger. How many Home Depot shoppers’ numbers have you pulled in your 6 months there?”

“You’re in a real uniform, man. I’m on some rent-a-cop shit.”

“There *is* that whole thing about girls and men in official uniforms,” Neal said, calling the play in Trey’s favor. “And you have a *federal* uniform, Jason.”

It touched me like a double-edged dagger whenever Neal came down on what I vaguely suspected was the brutish side of an argument. I saw Neal as my brother-in-nerdiness. True, he was ten years older, but that just meant his repertoire ran much deeper in the way of classic sci-fi. He’d majored in English, had once dreamed of becoming a writer, like me. We sometimes slurred about Pynchon and Dostoevsky at 6 in the morning. Neal even found a page of my writing in the living room one day, said it was good. Something to do with the nature of dirt in a fictional character’s environment, inspired by the dust bunnies I watched drifting down all day from the rafters of Terminal 1 on the heads of oblivious passengers. But, like me, when Neal found himself faced with pressure to prove sexual prowess, he rolled over.

“You probably should be having more fun with that arrangement,” Neal concluded.

“So what *do* you say to the females?” I asked Marco one day during a passenger lull. Marco, Sonny, and a few other officers were standing around the lane. “Aren’t you worried they’ll report you?”

I was running out of time to earn my player stripes in Terminal 1. We’d just had the shift bid; soon we would all be moving work locations. The TSA was always switching our checkpoint assignments, so we couldn’t fraternize. We got to bid for which Terminal and checkpoint we wanted, in order of seniority. I had few options left by the time I got to the bid sheet up in the rotunda, so I picked Terminal 5, checkpoint 10, an afternoon shift. Marco was also headed there, though he would be on the morning shift; he’d usually be gone by the time I signed in for work. It was going to be rough, Marco warned, dealing with all the non-English speaking passengers, which was why most officers didn’t want to work there. Checkpoint 10 amounted to chaos. But the thing about chaos was that it was easy to hide in it.

“You feel the situation out. Just start talking.” Here Marco affected a smooth-operator tone. “How you doing? Where you flyin’?”

“What’s your email address?” Sonny said in a nasally nerd voice.

“Shut up. Try to get their flight number so you know which gate they’re at. So you can sneak away and meet them down there.”

“You can escort them to the gate, too. Go above and beyond. Supervisor can’t fault you for that,” Sonny confirmed.

“And ETD their hands. You’re not allowed to pat females down but you can swab their hands. Use your imagination.”

Guys on the checkpoint would add all sorts of extra steps to the security process for select female passengers. The swab for explosives was supposed to be three swipes of each of the passenger’s hands: fingertips, pads, and the palm. But male officers sometimes swabbed women’s forearms, wrists, flipped their hands over to swab manicures and offer compliments. I wouldn’t be surprised if a woman’s toes were swabbed at some point at O’Hare by one of the foot fetish officers. We could always claim any given measure was random, a playbook play. The public could rarely tell the difference between absurd, illegal security screening, and official TSA screening. But all I wanted was to prove I could get a phone number, show Marco and Sonny that I could roll with the bad boys and girls, and have something to report back to Trey and Neal around the drinking counter. I was sure I could put up a smooth-operator front long enough to make it with a female passenger. At my core I’m a tangle of anxiety, but by one of those absurd twists of nature, it’s the risk of getting myself in a terrifying situation that most excites me. Dinner and a movie with a woman I’ve just met has always sounded like a stress-shot nightmare to me. But running out on the check with the woman, the cops in hot pursuit, and then hiding out in the back row of a movie theater for covert sex as searchlights crisscross the darkness all around us is a soothing thought.

My first passenger flirtation incident came one day when I was on the walk-thru. I watched a 20-something sandy-haired woman as she took her laptop from her bag, slipped off

her sandals and placed them on the conveyor belt, and then tried to come through. She lit up the metal detector. I asked her to step back, followed by the usual questions.

“You wearing a belt?”

She lifted her shirt to show me no belt. The sight of her smooth, tan stomach made me stutter as I advised her to remove the belly button ring, which kept her midriff in view for another minute or so. She tried to walk through again, but still alarmed.

“Anything in your pockets? Pack of gum? Maybe in your back pockets? Sometimes bras can set these things off. The wires. I don't know what kind of bra you have on there, but it could be setting this thing off.”

Sonny taught me the bra thing.

“Nope, nothing.”

“Where you flying? Maybe I should just call for someone to pat you down and get it over with. Wouldn't want you to miss your flight.”

I remember she seemed to sense the game I was playing. Seemed to sense, as most passengers could, when the questioning veered from national security-related inquiries to purely personal ones. She gave it right back.

“There's iron in our blood,” she said. “Maybe it's that? I took zinc pills this morning too. I put on body spray, who knows what's in that.”

“It also picks up weapons sometimes,” I said. “I forgot to ask about that.”

We went back and forth like this for a while, the passenger line backing up, everyone watching, tempers probably building, but I didn't care. Finally, John, an officer standing nearby, said, "It's her hair. The hair clip."

Her hair spilled over her shoulders as she removed the clip and handed it to John. As she walked past me through the metal detector, her slipstream scented with fruity shampoo, I asked where in Germany she was going.

"Berlin," she said.

"I'm jealous."

"You should come with," she teased. I was so taken with our back-and-forth that I believed her, turned around with a goofy smile.

"I wish, I wish," I said. I even took a couple steps in her direction, as though she were really inviting me to go with her. As though this thing were even possible.

I was jarred by John's voice off to the side. If a voice could be red-faced, his was.

"What are you doing?"

Up until then I'd only heard mellow, avuncular John. He didn't participate in the female code system, didn't participate in much of anything beyond his basic duties. A friendly, dull guy. But now I was faced with an angry John, which hadn't seemed possible until then. I had committed a grave sin, and I did not like seeing John angry.

I turned back around and resumed my position at the walk-thru, reluctantly letting the girl continue on her way behind me.

“*Don’t ever do that.*” John hissed. My face flushed further as I began to think maybe he was angry enough to call “CSS!” over this—bring Mishenko and checkpoint footage into this.

“Sorry,” I said. “I wasn’t going to actually follow her. I was just helping her. Going above and beyond.”

“You never. Turn your back. On the walk-thru. For any reason,” he said.

It was clear that if I was going to flirt with passengers, Peluso was right: I had to be smarter about it.

One shift, on toward evening, whispers began flying. *She’s coming. She’s coming.*

Manager Marty swooped onto the checkpoint, emerging from the cloud of passengers streaming past the backend of the checkpoint, barking into his walkie-talkie. He ordered lane 1 closed off from all passengers. The flyers who had been in line were told to merge with the lane 2 crowd, setting off a wave of grumbles. Lane 1 was now composed solely of an x-ray operator and an agent standing at the walk-thru, Sonny. I had been assigned to lane 2 that day, but I was on the rotation as a free floater, so I wandered over.

“What’s all this?” I asked Sonny.

“Celebrity. United is escorting her through.”

“Who?”

“Jennifer Hudson again.”

I had overheard officers shoptalking celebrity encounters before. Britney Spears was a super diva, refused to speak directly to officers. If Britney had to be patted down, she rolled her

eyes and unfurled her arms slowly until ten diamond-plated fingernails hung royally at her sides. She wouldn't pose for photos or sign autographs. They once shut down 9 for Spears, over in Terminal 3. *Shut down the entire checkpoint.* So I wasn't sure what this Jennifer Hudson thing was going to be like. I went around asking veteran officers what we were in for with Hudson, but nobody seemed to have any concrete opinions pro or con. The officers anxiously eyed lane 1, where a United supervisor stood, occasionally murmuring into her walkie-talkie.

“There she is,” someone eventually said.

The United supervisor was joined by Manager Marty out at the front of Lane 1, along with a small retinue of handlers. Glimpses of a woman in a brightly colored shirt occasionally peeked through the bustling entourage. They marched from the travel document checker's podium to the mouth of the x-ray, where Manager Marty and the United supervisor swam around Jennifer like cleaner fish as she removed her earrings, a large leather belt, and her shoes, all gingerly picked off by her handlers and gently laid on the x-ray belt.

When she came through the metal detector Sonny directed her to our roped-off corral for a pat-down. This was ostensibly due to the fact that Jennifer's shirt was loose and flowing; it didn't fit the contours of her body, per SOP, and was therefore considered in need of a pat-down. But really it was part of an unspoken TSA standard operating procedure for celebrities: you wanted to keep them on the checkpoint as long as reasonably possible, put them through as many security procedures as you could. Maximize autograph and schmoozing opportunities.

Sonny called out “Female assist!” and Rhonda took the job, walking Jennifer to the corral.

Chicago's very own Jennifer Hudson. A recent Oscar winner stepping onto a checkpoint full of bad actors. Over at Trey's house I had listened to his mother bragging about Jennifer, keeping with the entire South Side. She had grown up just a few blocks from Trey. "She used to play with the boys and girls around this neighborhood. I remember seeing her. She used to be one of us," Trey's mother had said.

If ever there was an opportunity to prove myself to Marco and Sonny, and have something to report back to Trey, this was it.

Rhonda should have only given an upper-body pat down, limited to the shirt, but ended up giving Jennifer the full-body treatment, for some reason. She was gorgeous, bangs spilling down to her big brown eyes. She politely flashed her American Idol smile as she nodded at all of Rhonda's advisements. She could have been any other flyer, there in her shirt, jeans and socks, if all the officers' eyes weren't on her, and if passengers' cameras weren't flaring out in the wait-lines.

Marco wasn't there for it. It may have been his off day. Or maybe he was canoodling with his United girl somewhere. But I could imagine what his response would be to the arrival of Jennifer: *Go get her number, homie*. Contrary to what I expected, none of the officers were talking to her. Usually, Rhonda gave pat-downs with a chatty cheerfulness, which sometimes took a venomous edge if the passenger got an attitude. But with Jennifer, Rhonda was silent. Celebrity-fright, I would later learn. People panicked and froze in the face of stars.

Well fuck that, I thought. If all these TSA veterans were too scared to say anything, they were about to see the new guy show them how it was done.

I walked over to the corral as Rhonda ran her hands over JHud's body.

"*Dreamgirls* was awesome," I started. No points for originality there, but hey. It was something.

"Aw. Thank you so much," she said. She had a sweet, bashful manner about her. OK, this Jennifer Hudson thing wasn't so hard. I could feel the checkpoint's eyes on me, and my audacity grew. I would make magic from this risk. What followed came out of me as though I were just a medium for something.

"Know you got the whole airport freaking out right now, don't you? Ehbody love them some JHud," I said.

She laughed. Rhonda looked over at me like *what the hell are you doing?* In some corner of my frontal cortex even I was wondering: who *was* this talking?

My black side had come out. Or rather, the way of talking I sometimes effected when I felt as though a situation called for me to "act black." I had first learned the benefits of this as a teenager while hanging with Trey and our mutual friends on the South Side, where I would be ruthlessly clowned on for being the whitest brown person in the room if I failed to present a certain style.

"Rhonda, I bet you gon' tell ehbody and their mama you got to pat down Jennifer Hudson today."

"*Oh my god,*" Jennifer said, laughing. She seemed genuinely embarrassed-yet-honored, as though she had no idea why all this attention. Though of course, she got such attention wherever she went, whether she wanted it or not. Trey's mother's words came back to me:

Jennifer Hudson used to be one us. Jennifer and I weren't so different, it seemed to me. My father had lived for many years on 75th and Stuart, not far from where Jennifer played as a little girl. Less than a year later her mother, like my grandmother, would be shot dead in a black-on-black crime.

“Rhonda, bet you gonna’ save those gloves and frame ‘em. Got you some Jennifer on ya’ hands,” I said.

“You are *so* silly!” Jennifer said.

I was certain Jennifer Hudson was feeling me. Maybe her phone number wasn't so far out of the question, after all. I began to imagine our life together. I had music in my blood, too; I wanted to tell her my father was a blues singer, like Tiny Joe Dixon, the guitarist who'd beaten out her and Beyoncé in the opening scene of *Dreamgirls*. I wished I could make her see that I was more than just another white-shirted drone running her through the security maze. I should have been flying with Jennifer. I imagined the checkpoint breaking out into a choreographed dance number, the officers spontaneously joining in. First, Rhonda would stop the pat-down and stand at Jennifer's side, snapping her fingers. Then Shaunda would come over and take up the other flank. The stentorian voice of the airport PA system, which usually announced the Terrorism Alert Level, would make the introduction over a feel-good Soul groove: *Ladies and gentlemen, O'Hare's Dreamettes!*

“Move, move, move right out of my life,” they would sing, watusi-pointing to the men on the checkpoint. The O'Hare Dreamettes would denounce all the male screeners with rhyming double entendres that made it clear we had no chance of getting in their bags. The TSOs would

try to contain the musical outburst and subject it to the security process, but the Dreamettes would shimmy and hip-bump their way out of our blue-gloved grasp.

Then I would tear open my TSA shirt to reveal a gem-studded outfit worthy of my father's blues costumes. I would prove I wasn't just another TSA screener. Prove it not only to Marco and Sonny and Trey, but to Jennifer, to everyone. Finally, Jennifer and I would go two-stepping down to the gate, off to LAX, to Hollywood.

But I said nothing more. After the pat-down Rhonda lifted the corral's rope and wished her a good day. Manager Marty and the other handlers collected all of Jennifer's items from the belt and helped her reassemble her person. Marty handed her his card in parting—*anytime you come through O'Hare, just call me*. Nice try, Marty. Then she disappeared back inside her United-led entourage, which made its way down the concourse.

I half expected Marty to reprimand me for my little performance, but he just stood there next to me, watching her go, probably running the whole encounter back in his head, proud of the way he'd handled another star. Likely fantasizing about a late night phone call from Jennifer. Rhonda, having stirred from her star-struck spell, slid up next to me.

“You sounded like a real idiot back there.”

A few weeks later I was free floating when my fellow agent Gene called a bag check. He pointed at a purse on-screen, a small digital splatter of light orange and green.

“Torch lighter,” he said.

“Where?”

“There. You can’t see it?” he said, swiveling around in the x-ray seat. “No wonder you missed that test last month.”

The bag belonged to a woman I’d noticed standing out in line several minutes before. Forty or so in an A-line skirt and white gym shoes. She and another woman around my age had been standing in the queue together, their conversation occasionally bubbling over into laughter. Now I was standing at the metal divestiture table with the older woman’s bag in front of me.

“Find something?” she asked.

She reached over and fingernail-tapped the Ziploc bag full of toiletries at the top of her purse. If Mishenko saw me allowing her to do that, I’d have been written up: passengers were never to touch their items until after the search was completed.

“I have the perfume there, but it’s 3.4 on the dot,” she said, and I caught the beautiful scent of ethanol on her breath. So that’s why the women’s conversation had seemed extra raucous. They’d already gotten the airport drinking fun started.

”No, something else,” I said, trying to keep my eyes on the purse and off the woman, who was slipping back into the blazer she wore over her white blouse. Her bra straps had gone askew in the process of disrobing, slinking a little down her tanned shoulders.

The younger woman came over to listen in on our conversation, having already slipped her flats back on.

“What’d you do now?” the younger woman asked both of us. Then she turned to her companion. “Maybe I should walk away. If this involves handcuffs I’ll have to distance myself anyway. You taught me that.”

They laughed. I wasn't in on it.

"X-ray operator said he saw a torch lighter, though honestly, I couldn't see it."

"Oh yeah, it's here," she said, reaching for the purse again.

"You're not supposed to touch it until after I'm done."

"Ooops. Well, it's probably near the bottom. Yep. You got it," she said, watching me, her head tilting from side to side as she slipped her pearl earrings back in. They wouldn't have alarmed the walk-thru, but she'd taken them off just to cover all her bases. A frequent flyer, alright.

I held the torch lighter in front of me.

"It's a stupid rule, I know. But these can't go."

"I thought lighters could all go now?" the older woman said.

"Yeah, I checked their website to make sure," the younger woman added. She turned to me. "Lighters are allowed now." She seemed like a defense attorney.

"Not torch lighters."

"Oh well. Sucks," the older woman said. "But no big deal."

"You can always check the lighter in with your luggage, back at the ticketing counter. I could escort you out there and then walk you back to the front of the line," I said, knowing damn well she wouldn't bite on that option.

"No, just throw it out."

"Where you ladies headed?"

“Back to D.C. Our flight’s delayed so we went out for a smoke,” the younger woman said, before turning to walk away. I was sure the older woman would follow. Probably just as well, I thought: flirting with frequent flyers was risky. They tended to regard TSA employees as serfs, and were no strangers to complaint forms. But then the older woman spoke again.

“So where do all the lighters go? All these things you take?”

It was a damn good question, one to which I still hadn’t been able to get a good answer. I always felt a little silly when trying to answer questions about the specific ways in which our rules were stupid.

“We put them in Hazmat. They get shipped off with all the other hazardous materials.”

“But it’s a perfectly good lighter you’re throwing out. You guys sell all these things and profit off us, don’t you?” she said. “I know how this works.”

“No, I think it just goes to some sort of landfill. For toxic stuff.”

The younger woman came back now, joined in on the game.

“But the only hazardous thing is the fluid. So couldn’t you just empty the fluid and give her back the lighter? Then it wouldn’t be prohibited.”

“Rules are I can’t empty anything on the checkpoint, Miss.”

“Then let me empty it,” the older woman said.

“I can’t let you touch this item, because it’s prohibited.”

“But you keep all the stuff right over there, in the garbage all day,” the younger woman said. “So if it’s dangerous, why do you let it all just sit here, right on the checkpoint?”

“You’re right,” I surrendered. “It doesn’t make sense. I just work here. Doing this part-time. I’m in college.” Whenever I was dealing with intelligent passengers I made sure to mention I was in school.

“First time I’ve heard a TSA agent admit something doesn’t make sense,” the younger woman said.

”Better make sure your boss doesn’t catch you,” the older woman said. They both laughed, again.

And again, I wasn’t in on it.

I met them after I got off, at the Chili’s Bar and Grill. By then I had taken Marco’s advice to get an employee-discounted membership at the O’Hare Hilton’s gym, so I had a white workout tee in my backpack every day. The women still had a couple hours to kill before their delayed plane arrived. I was on the clock to get a phone number, or a Facebook page, or something, before I never saw them again.

The older woman said her name was Mona. The younger woman, Anna. Mona worked as a lobbyist in D.C., and Anna was her intern.

We sat there at Chili’s, with the little TVs murmuring above, the din of passengers all around. Airport bar conversations peppered with acronyms—LAX, LGA, DFW. When I first walked in, Anna got up to let me sit next to her boss. It felt as though Anna was continuing some game plan silently set back at the checkpoint, communicated in a language infinitely more subtle than *uno to diez*.

At several points in our conversation someone at the bar or at a table behind us let loose with a complaint about the TSA—*and I lost a bottle of Johnnie Walker. Black label. Fucking TSA sons-of-bitches*—and all three of us exchanged glances and snickers.

“Most of your co-workers seem *really* boring,” Mona said. Her tan legs were crossed. She was on her second or third martini. Her skirt had ridden up to show cellulite-dimpled thighs. Such cellulite has always turned me on. I couldn’t believe the position I was in. Sitting next to Mona, this beautiful older woman, who one hour earlier had been just another passenger. Anna looked down at me and her boss as we spoke, too, as though she couldn’t quite believe it, either. “I see them every week. Regan International TSA is even worse than O’Hare.”

“Much worse,” Anna put in. “That bottle of wine they took last month.”

“I almost *did* follow up that threat and call the Senator,” Mona said.

“You *should* have. Guy was a dick about it.”

“Some of the people here are real uptight about the whole security thing,” I said. “Some of us are chill. I just try to slide under the radar. People gotta’ get to where they’re going. Why be a dick about it, you know?”

I had affected a Blue Collar Hard Working Young Black Man persona.

“I work with some of your bosses from time to time,” Mona said. “The top of TSA is a lot of FAA rejects. DHS boils down to a lot of failed bureaucrats from other agencies...”

I remember having to try not to be distracted by the shine of Mona’s nose, as I listened to her break down the TSA’s upper-level structure, which I then knew nothing about. Bureaucratic specifics have always bored me.

“...but DHS is growing fast. Remember the lady in that meeting a few weeks ago, PowerPoint wouldn’t start?” Mona asked Anna. “She just left DHS. Most people want out as soon as they get in...”

I wanted to say something insightful, but the government-speak sent my mind adrift. Mona wore a lot of foundation. Cream foundation. I saw it in her purse somewhere under the tampons. Coming up on her mid-forties, trying to hide the wrinkles. All the hours standing in security lines had begun to send the foundation slipping back out from her pores. She was one of those white people with a perpetually red nose, and the oiliness made it gleam. Makeup so often betrays one. Rarely worth the tradeoff. I used to wear cover-up back in high school when I broke out with acne junior year. Asked my mother to help me apply it in the mornings—she went shopping with me to help me pick out the brand that would best fit my skin tone. By the end of the day the cover-up would dry to a color different from my skin, drawing more attention to my acne problem than the zits would have alone.

I was sure that Mona and Anna, too, could see that my attempt at sangfroid was just a cover-up for the fact I didn’t belong there with them in that bar. The old panic attack set in. I began downing my drinks even faster. Outside the bar, security agents, supervisors and suits occasionally walked by. Technically, though I was out of my uniform, I was pretty sure there was something in the rule book about not getting drunk with passengers just after screening them. I could probably be fired for sitting there. What the hell was I thinking? I was awkward and nervous under pressure, anyone could see it. I was nothing like Marco, nothing like what Trey thought I could be. I wanted to tell the women, “I’m a writer! A scared, nebbish little

bookworm! Not a strong silent national security type! I should be at home right now, meditating on the butane torch I just confiscated from you!” Nothing would come of this little stunt besides termination papers and another hangover. These women were probably my bosses’ bosses, when it came down to it. I was way out of my lane. These weren’t fuck-up security guards. These were serious people with real careers, way up in D.C. What if they were tests, for that matter? What if this was all some sort of elaborate Red Team scenario?

I ordered another rum and coke to beat back the panic, but nothing makes me panic like trying to stay calm, and so I continued spiraling, throwing the drinks down faster and planning to excuse myself and get the hell out of the airport. And then Mona did it—harnessed the specter of my panic like one of those *Ghostbuster* traps, pulling the red-hot anxiety screaming and swirling to a single, calm point: my thigh, when she laid her hand on it as she emphasized a point involving budgetary caps. Her hand was only there for a few moments, and lightly, but its significance pressed right through the cotton fabric of my VF solutions trousers.

“So you two live together?” I asked. My courage was back, and it had me asking idiotic things. They probably took it as a jocular question.

“Apartment in Virginia,” said Anna.

“I live with my husband in D.C.” said Mona. At this Anna sort of looked away from both of us, as though something had materialized there in the corner of the bar that she knew might pop up, and which she didn’t want to consider.

Realizing that getting the phone number was probably out, and with the time before their boarding call drawing ever closer, I scrambled to figure out how to get something to brag about

from this. I worked up my courage further as we went on talking. Would I dare do it? Probably not. Most likely it would be another of those *I should have done this or that* sexual opportunities missed in hindsight situations. But at some point I promised myself that if Mona touched my leg one more time—she did, as she expressed surprise that I'd heard about officers finding shrunken human heads in the bags of international passengers over in T5—I would rest my hand on her knee. Her skin was cold from the bar's air conditioning. I flinched a little as I did it, at the potential consequences. Mona stiffened slightly, as though my hand were the cold one in the equation, but she didn't push it away. She didn't shout me out of the bar and head back to the checkpoint with the complaint to end all passenger complaints. Nothing. I left my hand there, on her knee, and she allowed me to keep it there for a few minutes. It seemed I was listening to my words from somewhere above the bar, as all my attention tuned in to her flesh.

I inched my hand up, a little here, a little there. I was on the inside of her thigh, now. She quietly allowed me to continue as our conversation went on. Her goose-pimpled skin warmed beneath my hand. At times she, too, drifted into a place where the conversation seemed to be on autopilot, her real attention lost in some quiet, charged synaptic vacuum. I moved my hand to the edge of her up-slid skirt when finally, she plucked it up and moved it back down to her knee. That was as far as she would allow the game to go, but it was far enough to drive my imagination for years.

I was hoping they would forget their plane, have to stay at the Hilton hotel overnight. Mona and I would softly combine her frequent flyer hotel discount with my airport employee discount, for one of the best deals on an overnight stay she'd ever seen. We'd raid the mini-bar

free of charge, with the help of my friend working the front desk downstairs. Mona would be impressed by what I could do for her as a TSA agent. But if she asked me, as so many passengers did, “What’s it like, patting down people all day long?” I would *not* offer to give her a demonstration. Instead, I would say, “I’m more than just the blue gloves, Mona. I use a vertical patting motion on people’s feet out there on the checkpoint, because my supervisors will write me up if I don’t. But off the checkpoint, I don’t care whether or not the patting motion is vertical, or horizontal. This is not who I am. Jesus. I want to be a writer. Someday, I’ll be a writer.”

Of course, I didn’t say any of this

Anna noticed the time about 30 minutes before boarding, and the harsh, humdrum worries about checks and boarding gates barged in. I walked them out of the bar, past the checkpoint where, so many drinks in and dizzy with Mona, I was no longer worried about being seen under the influence by fellow officers or managers. By then I was sure the fact that I was with two female passengers could not and would not be punished by the TSA culture. I asked for her phone number anyway, of course. She turned me down. Finally, I asked Mona if she’d be willing to pose me with me for a picture.

And so the next day, off to the side of the checkpoint, Marco and Sonny saw a blurry picture on my flip phone. Me, droopy eyed, with my arm around Mona, standing in front of the brachiosaurus skeleton. She smiled slightly in the pic, as though she were simply tolerating the dumb and eager 20-something at her side. Marco grudgingly gave me props.

“Whatever you said to trick her into this pic, it ain’t gonna’ work once we get to T5. The women over there ain’t even speaking your language.”

“Que numero?” I asked, slipping my phone back in my pocket.

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“Que numero?” I asked, slipping my phone back in my pocket.

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VITA

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EDUCATION

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Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
Thesis: *Playbook: A Memoir*
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PUBLICATIONS

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