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I Didn't Recognize Him

by Lesley Dawson

I had flown into JFK airport to visit my best friend who lived in New York. As usual after a transatlantic flight I was pretty tired and not thinking very clearly. Thank God that this time there had been no holdups and no lost luggage.

I remembered that last time I had flown via Raleigh, North Carolina, and been held up there for two nights. Nobody told me that August was the perfect time for storms to steam up the east coast towards New York, which prevented planes flying in the afternoons. Of course, my luggage had managed to fly on to my destination and consequently what I stood up in was all I had.

This present visit was the first time I had seen Andy since he had developed a nasty blood borne cancer. We had planned to meet in Vancouver a month earlier, but hospital visits and blood tests had prevented this. I now realised this might be my last chance to see this man alive.

I cleared customs and collected my luggage with no problem and walked out confidently through the 'Nothing to Declare' exit. After this I stood and waited and waited and waited. At first, I thought, 'No problem, they have been held up in traffic', remembering what driving was like in New York. After a while I considered asking the Information Desk for permission to use their phone to call the community where Andy lived. I discarded this idea when I realized I had not visited his house at Manhattan College before and had no address or telephone number. I would just have to wait patiently until I was collected.

By this time all the others from my flight had joyfully met up with their family or friends with shouts, hugs and bunches of flowers and all had made their way to the short-term care parks.

I was left alone and the man at Information looked at me so suspiciously, that I felt bound to smile brightly and explain that my welcomers had been held up. By this time even I was beginning to feel very uneasy. Panic was a vulture inside my body, trying to get out, pecking and flapping wildly at me. My blood pressure went up and wouldn't come down. Perhaps I had given them the wrong ETA, maybe I was arriving a day early, possibly there had been a road traffic accident somewhere along the way to the airport.

I tried to calm myself down remembering being in a similar situation at Nairobi Airport in Kenya. Fobbing off eager porters and persistent taxi drivers I had sat on my case waiting for my hostess to pick me up. I knew that a colleague was also flying in from the USA but could not see her anywhere. Then it had been heavy traffic that held them up. As I became familiar with the chaotic traffic in Nairobi, I began to understand the problem. Half an hour later my hostess arrived with my American friend, who had landed hours earlier.

By this time, I had been pacing up and down for over half an hour and was looking wildly around to see anybody I might recognize. In the distance I saw an elderly man coming towards me, shuffling and staggering painfully between two elbow-crutches. No that couldn't be him, surely, he had not deteriorated so much in such a short time. As this pathetic figure slowly came closer, I gasped as I saw signs that this indeed was Andy. What should I do? Should I wait where I was, or should I move towards him to shorten his journey?

I decided to walk slowly towards my friend and host and as I did so an overweight younger man scurried along the tunnel towards us. To give Andy time to catch his breath, the man, I would later know as Henry, apologized for their lateness and explained the difficulty of finding a car parking space close enough to allow Andy to walk to meet me. My panic had now subsided but in its place was what felt like butterflies with clogs on in my stomach that prevented me from breathing deeply as I contemplated the rest of my visit.