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Waiting to Go Home: On Being a Traveler in Trinidad



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“Tourists accumulate photos and mementos; travelers collect memories and friends.”

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In my observation, the distinction between a tourist and a traveler is that the former ventures afar to see places and do things—usually planned ahead of time—while for the latter, the cadence and meaning of their journey is determined most by the people they meet. Tourists accumulate photos and mementos; travelers collect memories and friends.

I land in Trinidad a month after Carnival. At the Port of Spain airport, there’s no air-conditioned taxi waiting to whisk me into town. I take a public bus, then walk a mile and a half to my budget accommodation near the small port. I came here to meet people. I want my days liberally peppered with the kinds of exchanges that don’t happen at home, due both to Seattle’s cool demeanor and my introversion.

In the hours after my arrival, I share jokes, smiles, and appreciable eye contact with random people. Helpful shopkeepers. Jovial homeless men. Courteous city workers. Nobody tries to hide their humanity. I can feel myself cracking open. *This is how you do it*, I tell myself, as a certain yearning evaporates.



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When I arrive back at my guesthouse, another traveler is out front smoking. His English is limited, and I don't speak Swiss-German, but I learn his name is Daniel, he's sixty-six, and a retired surgical nurse. We're both solo, perspiring, and worried the nearby traffic will keep us awake at night; that's where our commonalities end. He listens closely when I speak, though, and warm-hearted mischief glimmers in his eyes.

We meet again the next morning in the communal kitchen. I'm boiling water for instant coffee and oatmeal; he slices up bread and cheese. "Any plans for today?" I ask. He shrugs; it seems neither of us has ambition in this heat.

"I didn't sleep much. My room is small and it doesn't have a fan." I tell him that mine does and I slept like a champion. He laughs, but it lacks yesterday's spirit, and an hour later, seems lost in thought when I pass by him outside. I wave goodbye, and he raises one hand in solemn response, the stub of a cigarette peeking out between his fingers.

The humid, diesel-saturated air suffocates my skin on the walk down to the main road. An employee from the corner furniture shop shows me how to flag down a shared taxi, and I become the fifth body crammed into a car meant to hold four, talking sports and laughing with the others while rivulets of sweat run down my back.

The driver drops me opposite the bus station. I'm about to cross the intersection when a uniformed officer steps into my path. He points at my tank top, a souvenir from the Police's reunion tour, and explains that unless I'm a member of the force, it's prohibited to promote myself as such. My attempt at a chorus from "Every Little Thing She Does is Magic" falls on deaf ears, and so my first stop becomes a market stall selling cheap T-shirts.

The streets near the station hum with an effortless energy. I wander through women's clothing shops, amused by the skyscraper-high shoes, short skirts, and low-cut tops, in patterns and colors that make my local Eddie Bauer seem funereal. Though my wallet stays in my pocket, the shopkeepers are just as sunny when I exit as when I enter. On a stop in Woodford Square, a quartet of schoolboys answer my questions about the surrounding buildings, patient and polite as they play tour guide.

That evening, I occupy the empty chair next to Daniel on the guesthouse balcony and prattle on about how the counter staff at Hosein's Roti Shop gave me a full order of *pholourie*—fried dough balls and chutney—to try for free. (I love free stuff.)

He's more subdued as he stitches a Trinidad patch on a backpack already covered with a dozen flags. He points at Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama. "They are from this trip. The others come from the last three years."

“Wow, you must really be enjoying your retirement, hey?” I remark. “Did you do it all by yourself?”

“Most of it. I like to travel alone. It’s the best way to meet people.” He gestures toward me with his beer and takes a swig, and I wish I had a beer of my own so I could clink bottles with him. With his oval-shaped glasses and basketball belly, there is something endearingly garden gnomish about him. “Tomorrow, I visit the nature observatory with a Trini friend who has a car. You are welcome to join us,” he offers.

But I don’t see Daniel again for two days. When I ask him about the observatory, he wilts. “I didn’t go. My friend is sick. If he is better tomorrow, maybe we go.” There’s no mention of my participation in the outing.

We bump into each other a couple more times, me coming and going, Daniel sitting and smoking. I wonder how it is he’s lost interest in Trinidad, this wellspring of life. I’m hooked on its magnetism, lured by the bursts of calypso and soca in the streets. The day before, as I boarded the Maracas Beach bus, I followed another passenger’s lead and hugged the driver.

Our departure date arrives. In the purple shadows of pre-dawn, we share a cab to the airport, our flights only an hour apart. Daniel is in a different place. A different Trinidad. And he is waiting to go home. He twists around in the front seat to talk to me. I lean to hear him and he touches my arm.

“I wanted to tell you yesterday . . . I don’t have all the words.” He is struggling, and so earnest. “I think you are a very nice lady,” he finally says.

“Thank you,” I reply, a bit surprised; I’ve done nothing except bear witness to his being. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you.” We are silent for a moment, but he doesn’t turn away. “Do you have any trips planned after this one?” I ask.

“No.” Daniel’s response is too decisive and apprehension washes over me. “I am sick,” he says. “I have been sick for years.” He pauses. “In ten days, there’s a big party to celebrate my daughter’s thirty-fourth birthday. The next day, I go to the hospital. I am in a program with a Swiss organization, they are called ‘Exit.’”

Daniel motions as if he’s injecting a needle into his arm. “I get like this, and then, finished. I am finished with my life.”

I put my hand on his arm. “Daniel, I’m sorry.” It is so early that I am dense, and there’s still a language barrier. And we are hurtling through life inside our tin can of a taxi. Two travelers, never strangers.

“I have had many surgeries. They didn’t work,” he says slowly, and I can feel the toll they took on him. Once again, a pretend needle administers an injection. “Every day, I do this with morphine. Three times a day.”

“Even when you travel? You don’t have problems at borders?”

“I have a special kit. And letters from my doctors.” His eyes drift past my shoulder to the dusky landscape rushing by. “Morphine doesn’t stop the pain.”

“The lady who works at the guesthouse, she knows?” I’d noticed her gentleness when she wished Daniel farewell. *God goes with you*, she said to him.

“She saw me crying, wanted to know why I smoke and drink so much, why I cry. I only started to smoke last year.” We both smirk at the idea of him picking up the habit at sixty-five, and after a career as a nurse. “And I only used to drink when—I don’t know the word—when people came to my house. Now I drink a lot. I think it is okay. It helps my troubles.”

“And your daughter?” I realize I’m scared to know her name. “Does she understand?”

Daniel reaches into his canvas shoulder bag and pulls out an envelope. “I have written a letter to explain everything better, for the day after her birthday. By then, I am gone.” He tucks it away, his ace in the hole. “But at her party, I am acting good. Laughing and dancing.”

Lead in my lungs crushes my objectivity as I am thrown back four years, to what turned out to be the last hours of my father’s life. I spent the night by his side in a hospital that smelled of bleach and fear, watching as he clawed at his intravenous drip, barely conscious. In the morning, having convinced myself he would rally, because the alternative was inconceivable, I stepped out to grab a shower.

When I returned, the nurses at the desk froze for a fraction of a second, and I knew. The wail that escaped my throat stemmed partly from the hammer blow of his death, and partly from anguish that he hadn’t allowed me to be there, to say goodbye. He could have waited. I was on my way back. Why didn’t he wait for me?

In the smoke-and-booze-scented confines of the minivan, my heart fractures for Daniel’s daughter. I imagine her with the letter, and her cry reverberates through my body. For a moment, paralyzed by complicity, I am angry at Daniel, until I realize his orderly plan doesn’t afford him the opportunity to say goodbye to his loved ones, either. He is saying goodbye to me.

Road signs indicate we are nearing our destination. The taxi ride has gone by too quickly. “Are you sure you can’t tell her?” My voice comes out in a near whisper.

Daniel grimaces and shakes his head. His anguish is obvious. “I made everything good, I think. My money is finished—all used up on travel—but I am leaving my house for her. It’s a nice house, and I will take a day or two to clean it very well. When she comes there, she won’t have to do anything.”

He’s thought all of this out, had time to grapple with his decision, but I’m in triage mode. I am aware I’m judging him as if he’s chickening out—not from life, but from being a father. As if there’s a death protocol he’s not following, an exit strategy that isn’t agony.

The minivan pulls up to the terminal. As the driver unloads our backpacks, a plane rumbles overhead. Daniel and I pull out our wallets and I accept half the fare from him, cringing at my stalled compassion. I’ve spent all my Trinidad currency, keeping little more than what was necessary for the shared cab. I came here to meet people; I wasn’t prepared for him to die.

Inside the airport, the fluorescent lights amplify the starkness of our farewell. We hug, and I wait for Daniel to let go first.

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