lovereading.co.uk

Changing Planes

Ursula Le Guin

Published by Gollancz

Extract is copyright of the Author

SITA DULIP'S METHOD

THE RANGE OF THE AIRPLANE – a few thousand miles, the other side of the world, coconut palms, glaciers, the poles, the Poles, a lama, a llama, etc. – is pitifully limited compared to the vast extent and variety of experience provided, to those who know how to use it, by the airport.

Airplanes are cramped, jammed, hectic, noisy, germy, alarming, and boring, and they serve unusually nasty food at utterly unreasonable intervals. Airports, though larger, share the crowding, vile air, noise, and relentless tension, while their food is often even nastier, consisting entirely of fried lumps of something; and the places one has to eat it in are suicidally depressing. On the airplane, everyone is locked into a seat with a belt and can move only during very short periods when they are allowed to stand in line waiting to empty their bladders until, just before they reach the toilet cubicle, a nagging loudspeaker harries them back to belted immobility. In the airport, luggage-laden people rush hither and yon through endless corridors, like souls to each of whom the devil has furnished a different, inaccurate map of the escape route from hell. These rushing

people are watched by people who sit in plastic seats bolted to the floor and who might just as well be bolted to the seats. So far, then, the airport and the airplane are equal, in the way that the bottom of one septic tank is equal, all in all, to the bottom of the next septic tank.

If both you and your plane are on time, the airport is merely a diffuse, short, miserable prelude to the intense, long, miserable plane trip. But what if there's five hours between your arrival and your connecting flight, or your plane is late arriving and you've missed your connection, or the connecting flight is late, or the staff of another airline are striking for a wage-benefit package and the government has not yet ordered out the National Guard to control this threat to international capitalism so your airline staff is trying to handle twice as many people as usual, or there are tornadoes or thunderstorms or blizzards or little important bits of the plane missing or any of the thousand other reasons (never under any circumstances the fault of the airlines, and rarely explained at the time) why those who go places on airplanes sit and sit and sit and sit in airports, not going anywhere?

In this, probably its true aspect, the airport is not a prelude to travel, not a place of transition: it is a stop. A blockage. A constipation. The airport is where you can't go anywhere else. A nonplace in which time does not pass and there is no hope of any meaningful existence. A terminus: the end. The airport offers nothing to any human being except access to the interval between planes.

It was Sita Dulip of Cincinnati who first realised this, and so discovered the interplanar technique most of us now use.

Her connecting flight from Chicago to Denver had been delayed by some unspeakable, or at any rate untold, malfunc-

tion of the airplane. It was listed as departing at 1:10, two hours late. At 1:55, it was listed as departing at 3:00. It was then taken off the departures list. There was no one at the gate to answer questions. The lines at the desks were eight miles long, only slightly shorter than the lines at the toilets. Sita Dulip had eaten a nasty lunch standing up at a dirty plastic counter, since the few tables were all occupied by wretched, whimpering children with savagely punitive parents, or by huge, hairy youths wearing shorts, tank tops, and rubber thongs. She had long ago read the editorials in the local newspaper, which advocated using the education budget to build more prisons and applauded the recent tax break for citizens whose income surpassed that of Rumania. The airport bookstores did not sell books, only bestsellers, which Sita Dulip cannot read without risking a severe systemic reaction. She had been sitting for over an hour on a blue plastic chair with metal tubes for legs bolted to the floor in a row of people sitting in blue plastic chairs with metal tubes for legs bolted to the floor facing a row of people sitting in blue plastic chairs with metal tubes for legs bolted to the floor, when (as she later said), 'It came to me.'

She had discovered that, by a mere kind of twist and a slipping bend, easier to do than to describe, she could go anywhere – be anywhere – because she was *already between planes.*

She found herself in Strupsirts, that easily accessible and picturesque though somewhat three-dimensional region of waterspouts and volcanoes, still a favorite with beginning interplanary travelers. In her inexperience she was nervous about missing her flight and stayed only an hour or two before returning to the airport. She saw at once that, on this plane, her absence had taken practically no time at all.

Delighted, she slipped off again and found herself in Djeyo. She spent two nights at a small hotel run by the Interplanary Agency, with a balcony overlooking the amber Sea of Somue. She went for long walks on the beach, swam in the chill, buoyant, golden water – 'like swimming in brandy and soda,' she said – and got acquainted with some pleasant visitors from other planes. The small and inoffensive natives of Djeyo, who take no interest in anyone else and never come down to the ground, squatted high in the crowns of the alm-palms, bargaining, gossiping, and singing soft, quick love songs to one another. When she reluctantly returned to the airport to check up, nine or ten minutes had passed. Her flight was soon called.

She flew to Denver to her younger sister's wedding. On the flight home she missed her connection at Chicago and spent a week on Choom, where she has often returned since. Her job with an advertising agency involves a good deal of air travel, and by now she speaks Choomwot like a native.

Sita taught several friends, of whom I am happy to be one, how to change planes. And so the technique, the method, has gradually spread out from Cincinnati. Others on our plane may well have discovered it for themselves, since it appears that a good many people now practice it, not always intentionally. One meets them here and there.

While staying with the Asonu I met a man from the Candensian plane, which is very much like ours, only more of it consists of Toronto. He told me that in order to change planes all a Candensian has to do is eat two dill pickles, tighten his belt, sit upright in a hard chair with his back not touching the back, and breathe ten times a minute for about ten minutes. This is enviably easy, compared to our technique. We (I mean

people from the plane I occupy when not traveling) seem unable to change planes except at airports.

The Interplanary Agency long ago established that a specific combination of tense misery, indigestion, and boredom is the essential facilitator of interplanary travel; but most people, from most planes, don't have to suffer the way we do.

The following reports and descriptions of other planes, given me by friends or written from notes I made on my own excursions and in libraries of various kinds, may induce the reader to try interplanary travel; or if not, they may at least help to pass an hour in an airport.

PORRIDGE ON ISLAC

IT MUST BE ADMITTED that the method invented by Sita Dulip is not entirely reliable. You sometimes find yourself on a plane that isn't the one you meant to go to. If whenever you travel you carry with you a copy of Rornan's *Handy Planary Guide,* you can read up on wherever it is you get to when you get there, though Rornan is not always reliable either. But the *Encyclopedia Planaria,* in forty-four volumes, is not portable, and after all, what is entirely reliable unless it's dead?

I arrived on Islac unintentionally, when I was inexperienced, before I had learned to tuck Rornan into my suitcase. The Interplanary Hotel there did have a set of the *Encyclopedia,* but it was at the bindery, because, they said, the bears had eaten the glue in the bindings and the books had all come to pieces. I thought they must have rather odd bears on Islac, but did not like to ask about them. I looked around the halls and my room carefully in case any bears were lurking. It was a beautiful hotel and the hosts were pleasant, so I decided to take my luck as it came and spend a day or two on Islac. I got to

looking over the books in the bookcase in my room and trying out the built-in legemat, and had quite forgotten about bears, when something scuttled behind a bookend.

I moved the bookend and glimpsed the scuttler. It was dark and furry but had a long, thin tail of some kind, almost like wire. It was six or eight inches long not counting the tail. I didn't much like sharing my room with it, but I hate complaining to strangers – you can only complain satisfactorily to people you know really well – so I moved the heavy bookend over the hole in the wall the creature had disappeared into, and went down to dinner.

The hotel served family style, all the guests at one long table. They were a friendly lot from several different planes. We were able to converse in pairs using our translatomats, though general conversation overloaded the circuits. My left-hand neighbor, a rosy lady from a plane she called Ahyes, said she and her husband came to Islac quite often. I asked her if she knew anything about the bears here.

'Yes,' she said, smiling and nodding. 'They're quite harmless. But what little pests they are! Spoiling books, and licking envelopes, and snuggling in the bed!'

'Snuggling in the bed?'

'Yes, yes. They were pets, you see.'

Her husband leaned forward to talk to me around her. He was a rosy gentleman. 'Teddy bears,' he said in English, smiling. 'Yes.'

'Teddy bears?'

'Yes, yes,' he said, and then had to resort to his own language – 'teddy bears are little animal pets for children, isn't that right?'

'But they're not live animals.'

He looked dismayed. 'Dead animals?'

'No – stuffed animals – toys – '

'Yes, yes. Toys, pets,' he said, smiling and nodding.

He wanted to talk about his visit to my plane; he had been to San Francisco and liked it very much, and we talked about earthquakes instead of teddy bears. He had found a 5.6 earthquake 'a very charming experience, very enjoyable,' and he and his wife and I laughed a great deal as he told about it. They were certainly a nice couple, with a positive outlook.

When I went back to my room I shoved my suitcase up against the bookend that blocked the hole in the wall, and lay in bed hoping that the teddy bears did not have a back door.

Nothing snuggled into the bed with me that night. I woke very early, being jet-lagged by flying from London to Chicago, where my westbound flight had been delayed, allowing me this vacation. It was a lovely warm morning, the sun just rising. I got up and went out to take the air and see the city of Slas on the Islac plane.

It might have been a big city on my plane, nothing exotic to my eye, except the buildings were more mixed in style and in size than ours. That is, we put the big imposing buildings at the center and on the nice streets, and the small humble ones in the neighborhoods or barrios or slums or shantytowns. In this residential quarter of Slas, big houses were all jumbled up together with tiny cottages, some of them hardly bigger than hutches. When I went the other direction, downtown, I found the same wild variation of scale in the office buildings. A massive old four-story granite block towered over a ten-story building ten feet wide, with floors only five or six feet apart – a doll's skyscraper. By then, however, enough Islai were out and about that the buildings didn't puzzle me as much as the people did.

They were amazingly various in size, in color, in shape. A woman who must have been eight feet tall swept past me, literally: she was a street sweeper, busily and gracefully clearing the sidewalk of dust. She had what I took to be a spare broom or duster, a great spray of feathers, tucked into her waistband in back like an ostrich's tail. Next came a businessman striding along, hooked up to the computer network via a plug in his ear, a mouthpiece, and the left frame of his spectacles, talking away as he studied the market report. He came up about to my waist. Four young men passed on the other side of the street; there was nothing odd about them except that they all looked exactly alike. Then came a child trotting to school with his little backpack. He trotted on all fours, neatly, his hands in leather mitts or boots that protected them from the pavement; he was pale, with small eyes, and a snout, but he was adorable.

A sidewalk café had just opened up beside a park downtown. Though ignorant of what the Islai ate for breakfast, I was ravenous, ready to dare anything edible. I held out my translatomat to the waitress, a worn-looking woman of forty or so with nothing unusual about her, to my eye, but the beauty of her thick, yellow, fancifully braided hair. 'Please tell me what a foreigner eats for breakfast,' I said.

She laughed, then smiled a beautiful, kind smile, and said, via the translatomat, 'Well, *you* have to tell me that. We eat cledif, or fruit with cledif.'

'Fruit with cledif, please,' I said, and presently she brought me a plate of delicious-looking fruits and a large bowl of pale yellow gruel, smooth, about as thick as very heavy cream, luke warm. It sounds ghastly, but it was delicious – mild but subtle, lightly filling and slightly stimulating, like café au lait. She waited to see if I liked it. 'I'm sorry, I didn't think to ask if you

were a carnivore,' she said. 'Carnivores have raw cullis for breakfast, or cledif with offal.'

'This is fine,' I said.

Nobody else was in the place, and she had taken a liking to me, as I had to her. 'May I ask where you come from?' she asked, and so we got to talking. Her name was Ai Li A Le. I soon realised she was not only an intelligent person but a highly educated one. She had a degree in plant pathology – but was lucky, she said, to have a job as a waitress. 'Since the Ban,' she said, shrugging. When she saw that I didn't know what the Ban was, she was about to tell me; but several customers were sitting down now, a great bull of a man at one table, two mousy girls at another, and she had to go wait on them.

'I wish we could go on talking,' I said, and she said, with her kind smile, 'Well, if you come back at sixteen, I can sit and talk with you.'

'I will,' I said, and I did. After wandering around the park and the city I went back to the hotel for lunch and a nap, then took the monorail back downtown. I never saw such a variety of people as were in that car – all shapes, sizes, colors, degrees of hairiness, furriness, featheriness (the street sweeper's tail had indeed been a tail), and, I thought, looking at one long, greenish youth, even leafiness. Surely those were fronds over his ears? He was whispering to himself as the warm wind swept through the car from the open windows.

The only thing the Islai seemed to have in common, unfortunately, was poverty. The city certainly had been prosperous once, not very long ago. The monorail was a snazzy bit of engineering, but it was showing wear and tear. The surviving old buildings – which were on a scale I found familiar – were

grand but run-down, and crowded by the more recent giant's houses and doll's houses and buildings like stables or mews or rabbit hutches – a terrible hodgepodge, all of it cheaply built, rickety-looking, shabby. The Islai themselves were shabby, when they weren't downright ragged. Some of the furrier and featherier ones were clothed only by their fur and feathers. The green boy wore a modesty apron, but his rough trunk and limbs were bare. This was a country in deep, hard economic trouble.

Ai Li A Le was sitting at one of the outside tables at the café (the cledifac) next door to the one where she waited tables. She smiled and beckoned to me, and I sat down with her. She had a small bowl of chilled cledif with sweet spices, and I ordered the same. 'Please tell me about the Ban,' I asked her.

'We used to look like you,' she said.

'What happened?'

'Well,' she said, and hesitated. 'We like science. We like engineering. We are good engineers. But perhaps we are not very good scientists.'

To summarise her story: the Islai had been strong on practical physics, agriculture, architecture, urban development, engineering, invention, but weak in the life sciences, history, and theory. They had their Edisons and Fords but no Darwin, no Mendel. When their airports got to be just like ours, if not worse, they began to travel between planes; and on some plane, about a hundred years ago, one of their scientists discovered applied genetics. He brought it home. It fascinated them. They promptly mastered its principles. Or perhaps they had not quite mastered them before they started applying them to every life-form within reach.

'First,' she said, 'to plants. Altering food plants to be more fruitful, or to resist bacteria and viruses, or to kill insects, and so on.'

I nodded. 'We're doing a good deal of that too,' I said.

'Really? Are you . . .' She seemed not to know how to ask the question she wanted to ask. 'I'm corn, myself,' she said at last, shyly.

I checked the translatomat. Uslu: corn, maize. I checked the dictionary, and it said that uslu on Islac and maize on my plane were the same plant.

I knew that the odd thing about corn is that it has no wild form, only a distant wild ancestor that you'd never recognise as corn. It's entirely a construct of long-term breeding by ancient gatherers and farmers. An early genetic miracle. But what did it have to do with Ai Li A Le?

Ai Li A Le with her wonderful, thick, gold-colored, corn-colored hair cascading in braids from a topknot . . .

'Only four percent of my genome,' she said. 'There's about half a percent of parrot, too, but it's recessive. Thank God.'

I was still trying to absorb what she had told me. I think she felt her question had been answered by my astonished silence.

'They were utterly irresponsible,' she said severely. 'With all their programs and policies and making everything better, they were fools. They let all kinds of things get loose and interbreed. Wiped out rice in one decade. The improved breeds went sterile. The famines were terrible . . . Butterflies, we used to have butterflies, do you have them?'

'Some, still,' I said.

'And deletu?' A kind of singing firefly, now extinct, said my translatomat. I shook my head wistfully.

She shook her head wistfully.

'I never saw a butterfly or a deletu. Only pictures... The insecticidal clones got them... But the scientists learned nothing – nothing! They set about improving the animals. Improving us! Dogs that could talk, cats that could play chess! Human beings who were going to be all geniuses and never get sick and live five hundred years! They did all that, oh yes, they did all that. There are talking dogs all over the place, unbelievably boring they are, on and on and on about sex and shit and smells, and smells and shit and sex, and do you love me, do you love me, do you love me. I can't stand talking dogs. My big poodle Rover, he never says a word, the dear good soul. And then the humans! We'll never, ever get rid of the Premier. He's a Healthy, a bloody GAPA. He's ninety now and looks thirty and he'll go on looking thirty and being premier for four more centuries. He's a pious hypocrite and a greedy, petty, stupid, mean-minded crook. Just the kind of man who ought to be siring children for five centuries... The Ban doesn't apply to him... But still, I'm not saying the Ban was wrong. They had to do something. Things were really awful, fifty years ago. When they realised that genetic hackers had infiltrated all the laboratories, and half the techs were Bioist fanatics, and the Godsone Church had all those secret factories in the eastern hemisphere deliberately turning out genetic melds... Of course most of those products weren't viable. But a lot of them were... The hackers were so good at it. The chicken people, you've seen them?'

As soon as she asked, I realised that I had: short, squat people who ran around in intersections squawking, so that all the traffic gridlocked in an effort not to run them over. 'They just make me want to cry,' Ai Li A Le said, looking as if she

wanted to cry.

'So the Ban forbade further experimentation?' I asked.

She nodded. 'Yes. Actually, they blew up the laboratories. And sent the Bioists for reeducation in the Gubi. And jailed all the Godsone Fathers. And most of the Mothers too, I guess. And shot the geneticists. And destroyed all the experiments in progress. And the products, if they were' – she shrugged – 'too far from the norm. The norm!' She scowled, though her sunny face was not made for scowling. 'We don't have a norm any more. We don't have species any more. We're a genetic porridge. When we plant maize, it comes up weevil-repellent clover that smells like chlorine. When we plant an oak, it comes up poison oak fifty feet high with a ten-foot-thick trunk. And when we make love we don't know if we're going to have a baby, or a foal, or a cygnet, or a sapling. My daughter – ' and she paused. Her face worked and she had to compress her lips before she could go on. 'My daughter lives in the North Sea. On raw fish. She's very beautiful. Dark and silky and beautiful. But – I had to take her to the seacoast when she was two years old. I had to put her in that cold water, those big waves. I had to let her swim away, let her go be what she is. But she is human too! She is, she is human too!'

She was crying, and so was I.

After a while, Ai Li A Le went on to tell me how the Genome Collapse had led to profound economic depression, only worsened by the Purity Clauses of the Ban, which restricted jobs in the professions and government to those who tested 99.44% human – with exceptions for Healthies, Righteous Ones, and other GAPAs (Genetically Altered Products Approved by the Emergency Government). This was why she was working as a waitress. She was four percent maize.

'Maize was once the holy plant of many people, where I come from,' I said, hardly knowing what I said. 'It is such a beautiful plant. I love everything made out of corn – polenta, hoecake, cornbread, tortillas, canned corn, creamed corn, hominy, grits, corn whiskey, corn chowder, on the cob, tamales – it's all good. All good, all kind, all sacred. I hope you don't mind if I talk about eating it!'

'Heavens no,' said Ai Li A Le, smiling. 'What did you think cledif was made from?'

After a while I asked her about teddy bears. That phrase of course meant nothing to her, but when I described the creature in my bookcase she nodded – 'Oh yes! Bookbears. Early on, when the genetic designers were making everything better, you know, they dwarfed bears way down for children's pets. Like toys, stuffed animals, only they were alive. Programmed to be passive and affectionate. But some of the genes they used for dwarfing came from insects – springtails and earwigs. And the bears began to eat the children's books. At night, while they were supposed to be cuddling in bed with the children, they'd go eat their books. They like paper and glue. And when they bred, the offspring had long tails, like wires, and a sort of insect jaw, so they weren't much good for the children any more. But by then they'd escaped into the woodwork, between the walls . . . Some people call them bearwigs.'

I have been back to Islac several times to see Ai Li A Le. It is not a happy plane, or a reassuring one, but I would go to worse places than Islac to see so kind a smile, such a topknot of gold, and to drink maize with the woman who is maize.