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KILLING TIME AT HEATHROW

"Travel is the most private of pleasures. There is no greater bore than the travel bore. We do not in the least want to hear what he has seen in Hong Kong."

- Vita Sackville-West

My American Airlines narrower-than-need-be 767 has finally touched down in Europe. I've got a brief six and one half hours to kill before getting bck on an Air-bus and continuing my journey. All in all, I will only be away for five nights. That's not enough time, to my way of thinking, to justify a trip to Kansas City or Salt Lake, but it is more than enough time to scoot off to Asia, Europe, or Africa. One night to rest and another night is the only justification I need. I'll go practically anywhere in the world for two nights, but I've got to have a reason.

The reason, this time, is to find a small office in a large city where four men sit hunched over tables lined with small bits of plastic moulding and leaded metal casings, along with tubes of metallic paints and tiny brushes. The four men might be in a high, glass office building, or they could be working in a large room in a factory district, with rows of cardboard packing boxes lining the walls.

I've set out to find the men who make the best model ships in the world. They are nameless, faceless, artisans. But I've seen examples of their intricate work and I am at the threshold of becoming a collector. Two of the men, I've been told, are quite old. Their feeble fingers work more slowly than they used to, producing ships the length of three football fields to a scale of less than ten inches. They make fewer ships now. And I must find them before they stop, before the key is turned to the magic world that must be their workroom, for the last time.

At least that's what the left side of my brain thinks. The right side knows that this is just an excuse. I'm going for the same reason that I've always gone when the opportunity presents itself. I've always found the differences in people to be more interesting than the similarities, I've always found new places more interesting than new TV shows.

I've shuttled off to Terminal Two at Heathrow, which is not the glass-encased upscale shopping mall that is terminal four, the one BA saves for itself. my little terminal at Heathrow has barely enough commerce to keep me entertained for an hour let alone six. But I've got to try. Forty-five minutes buying ties, an hour an a half studying every title in a bookshop, a half hour for a "health sandwich" filled with chunks of bacon, and a cup of rather familiar coffee at McDonald's. Soon I was down to a three-hour wait.

The "duty-Free" shop was good for only twenty minutes. The only new liquor on the market was a kind of raspberry, chocolate blend from Israel that was being heralded as the "perfect ice cream topping". I could just see

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Hemingway swaggering up to the bar at the Ritz and ordering a class “straight up”.

I walked through the perfume section and let myself get sprayed by some very nice ladies in lieu of taking a shower. I was already starting to feel like a European.

The best things about Heathrow are the Arrival and Departure signs. Zagreb, Moscow, Addis Ababa. Dayton and Columbus don't exist in this world. Sit still for a moment in any Heathrow lounge, and a cross-sxection of the world will pass before you, sunburned lobster-red Germans returning from the Costa Brava, turbaned Sikhs seeking the Air-India gate, Saudi businessmen heading for the first-class lounge,

No one famous crossed my path while I waited but I saw a thousand stories unfold before my very eyes. The father saying goodbye to his wife and twin girls, bravely asking if she would “just reconsider”. “No Robert, I can't” she said, walking toward her gate as the final call for Air France's Paris flight was called. He just stood there, barely five feet away from where I was sitting, and I had to turn away as I saw the tears well up in his eyes. I wished she wasn;t going to Paris, of all places.

Finally, it was my turn to continue my journey and I began the long walk, with its many turns, to my Airbus, waiting in the afternoon sun.

After take-off, as we pulled out of a bank of puffy clouds, I wondered if Robert was on the Motorway back to his flat in London.

Despite the end of the Cold War, the EEC, and a level of general prosperity, I love Europe because of its eternal diversity. I can, at this moment, for instance, think of almost nothing that the resident of Oslo and the resident of Genoa has in common. As the Airbus levels off at 33,000 feet, I start thinking about how I might create the perfect European city, combining the best elements of each. Soon I fall asleep.

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