

Redacted

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"Good afternoon, passengers. This is the pre-boarding announcement for the flight to *redacted*. We are now inviting those of you with screaming little creatures and anyone battered by life to begin boarding. Please have your boarding pass and identification ready and make sure to look as devastated as possible so we can identify you on your ID. Regular boarding will begin in ten minutes, but your fellow passengers will ignore our announcement and start lining up right now, so feel free to be pressured into joining the line to stand for 30 minutes more until your group is finally called. Thank you."

If I had any advice for immigrants who travel, it would be to never engage in conversations with prying ladies at airports. One moment, they smile at you, and the next, they dissect every bit of your sense of self, chewing onto the leftovers of your

already shabby self-esteem. These pseudo-psychologists are easy to recognize by the look in their eyes. There, in the corner, barely hiding under the saggy eyelids, is the desire to pity a stranger. I believe they are born to smell outsiders and people pleasers. If this applies to you, I advise you to always pretend to be very busy or, at least, pick a point to stare at and don't look around. These women are everywhere. If you meet one - run in zig zags.

Once, I fell prey to one of them. It was as pleasant an experience as hearing from your crush that they like you for your personality and really want to stay friends. I remember it vividly. It was a warm day at the airport. People were rushing by, yelling, throwing themselves at passport control administrators, overall having a great time. The stewards announced the start of boarding. I, a member of the fifth group, instantly joined the standing horde of

passengers. As I assumed my place in a mess of a queue, I noticed her. There she was in her wrinkled grace. Sitting a couple of steps away from me, unaware of our soon-ish acquaintance. As she started raising her eyes, I rushed to look at my phone, which, on the other hand, decided that my moment of need would be a perfect opportunity to dramatically pass out in my hands. The traitor left me aimlessly staring at the floor.

"We are inviting the first group to board," announced the steward tiredly, and I, foolish as I was, looked up.

Our eyes met. She locked in on me. Smiled. Her cloud-like curls bounced as she nodded at me. Charmed, I smiled as well – my mistake. I had nowhere to escape to anymore. I successfully got people pleased into the conversation.

The old lady widened her face into a smile.

- "Are you going to *redacted*, for the first time, honey?" She began her interrogation.

I quickly shook my head, hoping to crawl out of the trap, leaving at least some limbs intact.

- "Oh, me too. Why are you going there?"

- "Ahm..."

I looked around, hoping to find something to distract her with. My mind was empty. She continued staring at me, waiting.

Eventually, I gave up. "I am a student."

- "How wonderful! I used to be a teacher, but now I am visiting my son..."

She went on and on talking about her family history, tracing all the way back to the days of Abraham Lincoln. Immersed in her monologue, she cheerfully spilled the tea about all of her relatives. Her dandelion curls hypnotised me. My body relaxed. People were passing us by. Her voice enveloped me like a rope, tightening. I smiled as she compared her grandson to a



waddling octopus. Then, her question cut through the illusion.

- "I can hear some kind of accent when you speak. Where are you from?"

I drew in a sharp breath. Maybe the address where my parents lived would satisfy her curiosity.

- **redacted**.

I forced a smile.

"The fourth group, welcome on board!"

Just a little bit longer.

- "Oh no, where are you really from?"

What does she want to hear from me? I remember telling her that I am a student. Maybe she'll like that answer instead.

- "That small place in **redacted**."

- "Hmmm."

She frowned.

- "But before that, where did you live? Where is your home?"

I looked at the steward. They looked back at me. But they didn't call for my group yet. The old vulture was still waiting for my answer.

What could I say? Which place did she expect me to say? Did she want to hear about that one? The scenery of which I was not able to recall anymore. The one whose smell has weathered away from my mind a long time ago. The one whose shadow still looms somewhere in my voice, evident to the stranger but already invisible to me.

The steward was quiet. She was quiet. I was quiet, too.

I cannot call it home anymore.

I cannot admit I don't remember my home anymore.

She kept staring.

The steward kept staring.

But I guess for her, I cannot be without a home.

I guess this void in my mind is *the home*.

"I am from... **redacted**..."

The woman grinned, satisfied.

She liked my answer.

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