



really likes, absorbing his electric purr along my torso. He gives me a wet sandpaper lick to the earlobe, and it ripples up my spine. For a moment we are still, breathing each other in. Before he struggles against my embrace but after a moment of tension that says he's about to, I release him. He turns about in a circle, then comes back and we do it again and again: the stillness-release, his will and mine balanced perfectly on a knife's edge.



Photo 1.

Anand Pandian [This photo appears in color in the online issue.]

Waiting

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At first there's nothing to say about this place. A long, dirty hall in lurid fluorescent light. Brown plastic seats, garish ads on the flatscreen TV. It's

the kind of place you tend to forget even when you're there. At least it's not pouring in here. It's still coming down in sheets outside the swinging glass doors.

"Everyone's waiting for you to finish your yogurt," I tell Karun. "We can get on the plane when you're done." When they say it has finally left Panama City, I can feel a lightness, even speed, surging through my body. A pulse of relief at the idea of finally leaving this implacably cold, gray Caribbean vacation? Or is it the caffeine?

But no, it hasn't left yet. The yogurt long gone, we're all still waiting.

Travel begins to feel more like a passage through time than space. Our toddler is finally asleep on my shoulder, and my recollections keep arcing away: from dinner last night to the vague sensation of dumplings stuffed with fat in Central Asia; from the creeper-wrapped trees on this island to the fallen guanacaste tree in Costa Rica two decades back; from the touch-me-nots I bent instinctively to brush along the path yesterday afternoon to others I must have learned to touch somewhere else, some other time I can't recall.

I step outside to take some pictures. The same train of dump trucks Karun and I spotted earlier this morning happen to pass across the road again. Maybe they keep doing that here, again and again all day, I wonder, like that city in Calvino's *Invisible Cities* where no encounter is accidental, where everything is always happening as it just has happened.

Time passes. The landscape around the airport no longer seems empty. What looks like part of a burnt-out airplane fuselage is lying beside one of the houses. A man cycles by. "Is that a real plane?" I ask. "It fell," he replies, adding that the owner of the house wants to make it into a park. Lying in puddles around the plane are a pizza box, black slipper, Panama beer can, miscellaneous bits of plastic debris. An oversized cloth glove looks at first like a pair of fingers bloated in the water, then like the starfish that Karun and I were looking at so keenly through greener water and finer sand yesterday afternoon. Oddly, this is the same kind of looking.

At 12:20, the man behind the counter explains that the clouds in the sky are still too low for the plane to approach. His name is Ruben. He's worked here since 1983. The wrecked plane fell 10-15 years ago, he says. Someone had planned to buy up the aluminum, but this guy got the whole thing for just a dollar in the end. Meanwhile, people are frantically reworking international connections in Panama City. Others keep streaming in, unaware that the only plane at the airport is that charred fuselage across the street.

Edgar "El Power" Humphries is working the counter next to Ruben. I ask about this nickname, written in boldface across the back of his dayglow vest. "He has power over old women," someone else jokes. "But not over the weather," I quip, and all of us share a laugh.

Suddenly, I'm struck by the feeling that there is too much to record, too much happening, that there is not enough time. I notice that the long hall is packed now with people waiting. They pass the time with juice boxes, smart

phones, laptops, cameras, books, chatter, and questions, pacing their feet, fingers playing idly on each other's arms.

Strangely ebullient, I wander over to our stirring child and his mother. "From now on we're only vacationing in places where it's summertime and where there's no rain," she says glumly, unmoved by my anthropological abandon. The signboard for Hacienda del Mar seems to be mocking us all from its place beside a Christmas tree that has also lingered here too long and out of season. "Pleasure at your leisure," it reads. Why am I enjoying this?

The plane is finally on its way now. Karun is restless again, still hungry after a granola bar. "It's a long day for you and me, imagine for him," a man from New York says, recalling car rides that used to feel like an eternity when he was a kid. "Time, you know?"

The plane finally touches down at 2:47. We've been waiting for it to arrive for nearly eight hours. People clap. Ruben lets the three of us out onto the tarmac first. Everyone else filing along feels oddly familiar, as though we've all been in some disaster film together.

"OK stop. Stop now. Stop chronicling. Be in the moment," my wife insists, trying to wrest the iPhone from my hands. But I can't, at least not yet—in fact, this too needs to be recorded somehow. "You are somewhere else," she'd said before with frustration, disgust, and maybe even a twinge of envy, as I looked avidly down the length of the airport hall, tracking invisible trails that drifted off to indefinite ends.

Joe's Bigfoot

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What is a man like Joe doing with Bigfoot? Joe is a *mexicano* who knew some of the same Spanish folktales that Juan B. Rael had collected many years earlier in the area around Antonito, Colorado. I found Joe in his store of "collectables" on Main Street. His store was a little community center where people from town dropped in to talk about the news of the day. Joe is a lot like his father, Anastacio, whose boot-making shop had also become a little community center. Joe remembers shepherders complaining to his father that the police had stolen their money. The shepherders came to