

Gate A-4

by Naomi Shihab Nye

(from Tender Spot: Collected Poems)

Wandering Around an Albuquerque Airport Terminal
after learning my flight was detained 4 hours, I heard
the announcement:

If anyone in the vicinity of gate 4-A understands any
Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.

Well — one pauses these days. Gate 4-A was my own gate.
I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian dress,
just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly.

Help, said the flight service person. Talk to her.

What is her problem? We told her the
flight was going to be four hours late and she did this.

I put my arm around her and spoke to her haltingly.

Shu dow-a,shu-biduck habibti, stani stani schway, min fadlick, sho bit
se-wee?

The minute she heard my words she knew — however poorly used — she
stopped crying. She thought our flight had been
cancelled entirely.

She needed to be in El Paso for some major medical
treatment the following day.

I said no, no, we're fine, you'll get there, just
late, who is picking you up?

Let's call him and tell him. We called her son and I spoke with
him in English.

I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on
the plane and would ride next to her.

She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it.

Then we called my dad and he and she spoke for a while

in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I
thought just for the heck

of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and
let them chat with her.

This all took up about 2 hours. She was laughing a lot
by then. Telling
about her life. Answering questions.

She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies —
little powdered sugar

crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts — out of
her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my
amazement, not a single woman declined one.

It was like a sacrament.
The traveler from Argentina, the traveler from California, the lovely
woman from
Laredo — we were all
covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling.
There are no better cookies.

And then the airline broke out the free beverages from
huge coolers —
non-alcoholic — and the two little girls for our
flight, one
African-American, one Mexican-American — ran around
serving us all apple juice and lemonade and they were covered with
powdered
sugar, too.

And I noticed my new best friend — by now we were
holding hands —
had a potted plant poking out of her bag,
some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves.
Such an old country traveling tradition.

Always carry a plant.

Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones
and thought,
this is the world I want to live in.

The shared world. Not a single person in this
gate — once the crying of confusion stopped — has
seemed apprehensive about any other person.

They took the cookies.

I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen,
anywhere.

Not everything is lost.