

My Airport Story

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I identify myself as an Indian American. My parents were both born in Bangalore, India, while I was born and raised in Lexington, Massachusetts. As far as Indians go, my skin color falls on the lighter side. People have mistaken me for Brazilian, Mexican, Arab, or even Italian. (I work as a sports reporter for the local ABC-TV affiliate in Missoula, Montana. A few weeks after I got hired, someone called the station and asked, “Why are there so many damn Mexicans working for you?”) My facial hair grows very quickly, and when I go four or five days without shaving, I suddenly look like a member of that ambiguous, impossible-to-define race known as...terrorist!

Ever since the attacks of 9/11 caused tightened airport security in the United States, “shave before you fly” has kind of been a running joke with my family and friends. I usually like to take advantage of my vacation time by not shaving, and I’m sure this has caused me to be “randomly” selected for a more detailed security screening my fair share of times, but I’ve honestly never felt racially profiled in any of these instances. As a frequent flyer, I just chalk it up to luck of the draw. And truthfully, it probably makes more sense to search someone who looks like me than it does a little old white lady. As long as it is done without any hostility and doesn’t cause me to miss my flight, I have no problem with it.

I recently spent a weekend visiting my sister, a college student in Washington, D.C. I was scheduled to fly back to Missoula from Reagan National Airport just outside of D.C. When I got to the gate, I found out my flight was delayed, giving me an hour and a half to kill at the airport.

Before I continue, let me give this disclaimer. I feel wrong even associating myself with the word racism or the term racial profiling. I’m not

naive enough to think that I've never been judged by someone because of the color of my skin, but I grew up in a diverse and tolerant town and have never felt my rights or opportunities diminished because of my race or ethnicity. Since 9/11, I know there are many people who have gone through some horrifying experiences because they "look like a terrorist." For this reason, I feel like I would be doing a disservice to those who have experienced *true* racism by even comparing my situation to theirs. I share this story because I think it provides an interesting look at the way people perceive those who don't look like they do.

The gate is fairly crowded.

I sit down two seats away from a black woman, and an older white woman (probably in her mid 50s) is sitting in the row of seats perpendicular to my right side. I exchange a smile with both of them and take my seat. I open up my black Adidas gym bag and pull out the book *Bird Watching*, an autobiography of former Boston Celtics basketball player Larry Bird. Buried in my book, I really only notice these two people.

After about 45 minutes of reading, my stomach starts to rumble. With plenty of food options in sight right around me, and just 20 minutes until my flight is scheduled to board, I decide it is time to eat.

By this time, the gate has become a lot more crowded.

Naturally, I prefer to eat sitting down rather than standing up. Not wanting to lose my seat, I debate for a minute whether I should leave my bag on the seat or take it with me. The incessant airport announcements play back in my head like a broken record.

"Please do not leave your bags unattended at any time. Please report any suspicious-looking items to security."

I take a look around and see two bags on top of a seat a few feet away from me, their rightful owner nowhere in sight. "No big deal," I think to myself. Rules are meant to be broken. I put my book back in the bag, place the bag on my seat, and walk no more than 100 yards to get myself a slice of pizza.

I get back to my seat roughly five minutes later and my bag is gone. Immediately, I start to panic.

I make eye contact with the older white woman who has been sitting near me the entire time, and she says, “I called security to take your bag because I didn’t think you were coming back.”

I look to my right and notice the other two unattended bags are still sitting on the same seat. It takes a lot for me to bite my tongue, but all I manage to say to her is, “Wow, I really wish you hadn’t done that.”

There’s now just 10 minutes before my flight boards, and I have no idea where my bag is or what I’ll have to do to get it back. As I’m running back towards the security screening area, I see a security guard holding my bag, walking in the opposite direction of my gate. Realizing that sprinting full speed through the airport will probably make me look more suspicious, I slow down as I approach him. After apologizing a few times for leaving my bag unattended, I explain the situation to him. I tell him the contents of the bag, providing as much detail as I can remember. After opening it up and briefly checking it out, he gives it back to me without a problem.

As I walk back to the gate, I think of what I am going to say when I see my lady friend again. I decide on, “Just because someone doesn’t look like you doesn’t make him a threat.” I am in no way a confrontational person, so this would be very out of character for me. Yet I feel like something needs to be said.

The flight is boarding by the time I get back to the gate. I see her at the front of the line, and our paths do not cross. When I get on the plane, for a moment it looks like I will be sitting right next to her! However, I am actually in the row directly in front of her—narrowly avoiding what would be one of the most awkward situations in the history of commercial air travel.

I look right at her as I’m getting into my seat. She avoids eye contact. When we land in Denver, I take my bag out of the overhead cabin in front of her and cradle it in my arms like a newborn baby. We finally make eye contact. I give her a smirk, turn around, and walk off the plane. She breathes a sigh of relief that my dangerous bag and I didn’t blow up the plane.

I was immediately hit by two emotions when I found out security was called to take my bag away. Anger and embarrassment. The anger didn’t surprise me, but the embarrassment did. Was this lady really threatened by me the entire time I was sitting near her? Was she watching without me

noticing, studying my every move? Did she consult the other people sitting around me before having my bag removed? Were they threatened by me too?

As I thought more and more about it, I began to wonder if I was assigning prejudices to people that didn't actually exist. After all, I did leave my bag unattended, which is an airport no-no. What if there actually *was* something dangerous in my bag? Isn't it better to avert disaster at the risk of offending one person? Yes—there were other unattended bags in the area that did not get picked up, but maybe she didn't notice them when she called security to take mine away. I guess I will never know.

At the end of the day, I chose to look for the humor in this particular situation. It was a harmless incident that didn't cause me any real trouble. How mad could I be? It made me laugh to think about a terrorist sitting at the airport intently reading Larry Bird's autobiography. That certainly isn't the mental image most people conjure up when they envision a terrorist. (I spent a semester studying in London a few years ago. Over spring break, my friends and I traveled around Italy for 10 days. I didn't shave the entire time, and was reading a book titled *al-Qaeda* for my "Islam and the West" class while we were traveling. If you want to get some paranoid looks from people—try doing that!)

It also made me think of a skit from bi-racial comedian Russell Peters' standup routine:

"People really need to learn the difference between a terrorist and an Indian...Terrorists hate Americans. Indians hate each other. A terrorist will blow up the airport. Indians like to work at the airport!!"

Maybe joking around about what happened is my defense mechanism. What will stick with me is the embarrassment I felt in the immediate aftermath of the incident. Again, it is with great reluctance that I even compare what happened to me with any truly significant incident of racial profiling or prejudice. What I felt is probably not even 1/1000th of what many others have.

I have spent my entire life feeling accepted and one very minor incident will not change that. However, to say it had no impact on me would be a lie. I've spent nearly 2,000 words telling the story, so clearly there is some impact!

It made me realize the strength of those who fought to give me the rights I enjoy today as an Indian American. They remained strong through great injustice and persevered while others tried to shame them. Without them, I would not be able to say I've always been accepted and would not have the forum to tell this story. For that, I am eternally grateful.