

PROMPT #1: Center your story around a character discovering a hidden door or path.

The Terminal

by Anonymous

The four-fifteen afternoon bus had not arrived yet, and now it looked as if it might not arrive at all. The heavy rain finally forced him to abandon his vigil for the bus and head for a nearby bridge instead. The bridge was more of an overpass of sorts, albeit short enough to require clearance warning signs on the support columns.

The early spring weather had proved to be quite a handful, as the crackling of the rain was only interrupted by the occasional rumble of a vehicle passing overhead. He finally gave rest to his battered umbrella, and began a vain effort to dry his soaked clothing.

But after the fifth round of wringing his drenched shirt, he simply gave up.

“Why do I even bother?” he asked himself, aloud.

The question was, of course, rhetorical. There was no-one around to hear him, and even if they were, the sequence of events that had led to him shivering like a wet rat under a highway overpass would have been completely lost on them.

‘Purely economic factors’ was the term his employers had used, when the third-quarter layoffs were announced. It had been several months since then, and certain changes had been necessary. Chief among them was ditching his car for cheaper, less comfortable options. And right now, he didn’t just wish for the warm, dry cabin of a car. He wished for *literally* anywhere else.

“ANYWHERE!” he shouted, “Dammit, ANYWHERE else!!”

But his words drowned quickly in the ceaseless rain. Under the overpass, he began to take in his surroundings. Under one of the concrete roadway supports, he noticed a large, vertical hatch, which he assumed to be an entry to a storm drain.

He glanced around briefly, but given that he had nowhere to go and nothing to lose at the moment, he decided to explore for a bit. At the very least, it would give a shelter from the wind, which was really starting to pick up.

The lever for the latch had been rust-welded in place, and he began striking it with a rock in an effort to break it free. Finally, after several rounds of strikes, the latch moved and the door began to squeak open. The tunnel inside was quite dark, so he quickly switched on his (thankfully waterproof) phone flashlight and began to enter the tunnel.

From the access hatch, a small ladder descended downwards to the main stretch of the tunnel. The tunnel itself was quite large, several feet in diameter. Not massive, but sufficiently large to walk in, albeit only if heavily hunched over. At the bottom of the tunnel, some water flowed, though this was only an inch or two deep. As he advanced, he noticed a slight upward gradient, and that the water was getting steadily shallower.

Exploring the tunnel was proving to be a surprisingly enjoyable experience. In some ways, it reminded him of his childhood. At the time, his house was located near a large forest, and he would often explore the woods with his twin sister. The flood of memories brought a smile to his face, and for a moment he felt at ease.

But that house was long-gone, and though she used to call him on occasion, they hadn't spoken to each other in quite some time. It seemed that time and distance could erode any bond; and theirs was no exception.

In any case, a red glow further ahead caught his attention. As he approached, he noticed that it was an exit sign. Next to it was a large, vertical shaft with a series of steel rungs reaching upwards.

Despite his initial surprise, he quickly grabbed hold of the rungs and began to climb. He began to wonder what was located above. In all likelihood, it was a roadway, which would introduce a minor decapitation risk if there were cars traveling overhead.

When he reached the top of the shaft, he placed his hand against the manhole cover, sensing for the vibrations of passing vehicles. But he felt none. As a matter of fact, he couldn't hear the rain either, and the cover felt dry.

He began to push upward on the cover, using his back and legs to exert as much force as he could. Finally, after several rounds of pushing, the cover popped up slightly. Slowly, he pushed the cover aside, and began to peek out cautiously. But instead of being decapitated by a semi, he was greeted by a far more perplexing and disturbing sight.

An airport.

More specifically, an airport terminal, and he was inside it. He finally emerged from the manhole and began to take in his surroundings.

The terminal looked to be quite old. The floor was white tile, eventually giving way to a tan carpet near the seating area. A series of white columns supported the ceiling overhead, and a clock mounted on the wall indicated a quarter to one. An enormous floor-to-ceiling glass wall gave a view of the tarmac outside. Parked there were a series of vintage aircraft, several Lockheed Electras and Super-Constellations. The aircraft were all painted similarly, a pearl white base with a crimson-red pinstripe

running along the fuselage.

Despite its apparent age, the airport and the aircraft outside looked to be in immaculate condition. The floor tiles still had a glossy finish, and the red velvet of the terminal seats looked almost brand new. As he sat down, he began to relax, taking in the warmth and comfort of his surroundings. And then he noticed.

The emptiness.

There was not a single passenger or worker in sight, and the entire building was deathly silent. Even outside, there did not seem to be any personnel tending to the aircraft. The entire scene felt as if it had been frozen in time.

That is, until the echo of approaching footsteps alerted him. He dove under one of the bench seats, listening as the footsteps approached closer and closer, before finally coming to a stop.

“Erm, Mister Johnathan Langley?” came a British-sounding voice. John slowly emerged from beneath the seats, and caught sight of the figure now standing a few feet away.

He was a tall, gray-haired man, looking to be in his late 60’s. He was unusually well dressed, wearing a black suit and bowtie with white gloves. In one hand, he carried a small leather briefcase.

“Good afternoon, Mister Langley.”

“Who are you?” asked John, “and how do you know my name?”

“Mister Langley, it is simply my business to know such things” the man clarified, “You see, I am the caretaker of this terminal, you may call me Alfred.”

“I see,” John noted as he glanced around. “Well, uh, ‘Alfred’, where – and *when* exactly are we?”

“We are at the terminal” Alfred noted with a light smile, “The terminal is a connection to any place the human mind can imagine.”

“Is it normal for people to crawl into the terminal through a storm drain?” John asked as he motioned towards the open manhole cover on the ground.

“Ah, everyone has their own way of finding the terminal,” Alfred explained. “Some are more creative than others. Your method is definitely an interesting one”

“The terminal, you see, can be found by those under great duress” he continued, “Tell me, Mister Langley, how have you been doing recently?”

John paused for a moment, not sure whether or not to continue talking with the mysterious man. But at this point, there was little else he could do, since it seemed that Alfred already knew who he was and how he had arrived here. He spared little detail as he told his story to Alfred, about the general downhill trajectory of the past few months, and how things were not looking very good at the moment. As he described his life in detail, Alfred only nodded with contentment. John felt at ease, thinking about how long it had been since he had personally confided with someone.

“Perhaps we should make a trip to the observatory?” Alfred suggested.

“The observatory?” asked John.

He began to lead John along a series of rooms which ran down the length of the terminal, on the side opposite to the windows. Finally, they arrived at a large steel door, labeled “OBSERVATORY”.

“The observatory” Alfred explained, “Is where you may observe and alter your destination as you please.”

“Wait, *alter* the destination?” asked John.

“Why yes! Of course, you can always alter the destination after you’ve landed, but it’s always good to have an established starting point” Alfred explained, “Allow me to demonstrate!”

Alfred led the way into the room, which was an enormous dark chasm which seemed to stretch infinitely in every direction. No sooner had the door closed, than the ground beneath them began to shift and the room illuminated.

John now found himself standing on a beach. The shoreline was bordered by mangroves on one side, and the sea on the other. The warm ocean winds toyed with his hair, and the crashing of waves echoed in the distance.

“What do you think?” Alfred asked.

“I don’t know” John noted, “I personally prefer forests”

“Can you think of one?” Alfred queried.

“Of course” said John, as he visualized the woods near his former house.

The scene instantly transformed, and John now found himself standing in the middle of the forest he had spent so much time in as a child. The birds chirped overhead, as a warm breeze rustled through the trees.

“You see, the observatory, much like your destination, can be altered to your liking” Alfred explained, “This includes structures and machinery, if you so please.”

John imagined a cabin, and a beautiful log cabin immediately materialized before him, complete with a chimney. Next he imagined a tractor, the same one his grandfather used to drive on his farm. The tractor materialized, complete with all the rust that came from decades of heavy usage. He climbed into the driver’s seat, and twisted the key. Sure enough, the tractor turned over, and its ancient diesel engine clattered to life.

“Man, this seems like paradise!” John exclaimed.

“Of course it is. No hunger, pain, thirst, or aging” Alfred explained, “This is as close to a paradise as a mortal being can get.”

“But what if I get bored with all things in my head?” John asked.

“Ah yes, the case of a finite mind with infinite desires!” Alfred smiled, “If you desire a random new destination, simply clear your mind, and hold your boarding pass to your forehead. You’ll receive that at the gate.”

John stared in awe at the machinery and surroundings that lay before him.

“If you’re satisfied, Mister Langley, then perhaps we should head back to the terminal?” suggested Alfred.

John nodded, excited for the near-infinite adventure that now lay before him. But in the back of his mind, he felt as if he was forgetting something; as if something critical was missing from the scenery around him. Despite the warm weather of the forest, on the inside, he felt unusually cold. Then again, he was sure he would figure it out eventually. After all, an eternity is a very long time.

As they returned to the quiet atmosphere of the terminal, Alfred closed the observatory doors behind them, and they began walking towards the gate near the manhole. Alfred reached into his briefcase and pulled out a boarding pass, handing it to John.

“Flight 336F, boarding whenever you are ready, Mister Langley.”

In the distance, outside the gate, one of the Super-Constellation’s engines began to turn over, and soon clattered to life. This was soon followed by a second engine.

He quickly glanced through the boarding pass. The pass was about the size of a credit card, made from smooth, brushed stainless steel. The flight number and his name were etched into the metal. He noticed a lack of return date or time. In fact, there was not a departure date either.

“Is there any possibility of a return flight?” asked John, “Like, what if someone wants to come back?”

“I’m afraid, mister Langley, that for logistical reasons we do not offer return flights” Alfred noted. “However, as I noted, you can alter your destination as you see fit, and your boarding pass can take you anywhere, even places you cannot imagine.”

“Thanks for the advice,” John smiled. “I guess I better keep this handy!” he noted as he pulled out his wallet and slid the boarding pass into one of its pockets. But when he opened the wallet, he noticed something that made him freeze.

“Is something the matter, Mister Langley?” Alfred inquired.

Yes, something was the matter.

Staring back at him from the wallet was an old photograph of his sister; the same one she had given to him when they parted ways for college all those years ago. He suddenly realized what had been missing at the observatory.

People.

“I’m sorry Alfred, I’m afraid I can’t accept this flight” John solemnly replied.

Alfred raised an eyebrow “And why would that be, Mister Langley?”

“I don’t know,” John mused. “I just think it would be kinda lonely to spend an eternity with just my mind to keep me company.”

“You could always imagine other people, Mister Langley,” Alfred suggested.

“Yeah, I guess, but that wouldn’t be the real thing, now would it?”

“I suppose not,” Alfred mused. “Mister Langley, if you’ve decided to return home, I must ask you to surrender your pass” Alfred informed him, “But I should note that departing this terminal will permanently forfeit your right to return.”

John hesitated for a moment, thinking of the wonderful things he had experienced in the observatory. It would be an eternity of carefree relaxation – anything his heart could imagine. But then his mind shifted to the old world. To the people who would be expecting his calls. To the people he had yet to meet.

Finally, he pushed the boarding pass into Alfred's outstretched hand. In the distance, the engines of the Super-Constellation sputtered and cut out.

"I congratulate you for your decision, Mister Langley," Alfred noted as he returned the boarding pass to his briefcase. "In this case, I bid you farewell" he said as he reached out his hand.

"Thanks for hospitality," John noted as he shook hands with the caretaker. "And sorry for all the trouble."

"No worries, Mister Langley. This is simply part of my job" the noted as John returned to the access shaft.

John lowered himself down the ladder rungs, taking one last glance at the caretaker, who waved goodbye before retreating along the row of gates. He slid the manhole cover shut, and began to descend. As he reached the main section of the tunnel, he noticed that the water level had risen considerably. Since the return trip was on a downhill slope, he was forced to wade deeper and deeper, until he was chest deep in the murky storm water. Finally, just a few feet from the entrance, the water level filled the tunnel completely.

Gathering his composure, he closed his eyes, held his breath, and dove in, pushing forward as he felt against the ceiling of the tunnel. Inch by inch he moved forward, and just as his oxygen supply began to deplete, he felt the tunnel open up above him. Immediately, he shot to the surface, coughing and gasping for fresh air as the water churned around him. After pausing for a moment to catch his breath, he climbed up to the access hatch and lowered himself outside.

The rain had slowed considerably, and the clouds were starting to break. He was cold, wet, and caked with mud. But he didn't mind, because he was very much alive, and the world around him was very much real.

And besides, he had a phone call to make.