



S nail Mail Review

A contemporary literary journal with old-school style

Issue 7 Spring 2014

One Hour to Madrid

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She was filled with a nauseous mix of exhaustion and apprehension as she stared out the small airplane window. Shivering, she adjusted the blanket around her shoulders, then turned to glance at the cabin. Blue blankets, blue seats, blue carpet, and of course, the blue ocean far below, hidden beneath the thick clouds that gleamed silver in the transatlantic sunrise.

She thought of his blue eyes and silver-blond hair, wondering if he'd look the same today as he had on another European morning, outside the hotel in Kensington. He was drinking coffee, smiling as he greeted some older Australian ladies who were boarding the tour bus. She'd frozen when she saw him, certain that he was a figment of her jetlagged imagination, or at least that she was headed for the wrong bus. He paused too, looking at her closely before excusing himself to come over to her.

"Justine, is it?" She'd nodded. "Glad you found us, darling. I'm Elliot, your tour director. Where's your bag?"

"The airline lost it," she'd told him, gesturing pathetically to her green backpack. "I just have this."

"Oh, God. British Airways, right?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"There's one every tour, I'm afraid. We'll call them when we get to Oxford, all right? For now, why don't you find a seat in the coach and we'll get going?" He'd taken her backpack and handed it to the driver to put with the luggage before she could even apologize for sleeping through her wakeup call.

Now, she laughed quietly to herself. Her suitcase had met her in Plymouth three days later. She hoped Iberia did a better job keeping track of their luggage. Then again, maybe she wouldn't need as many clothes on this trip.

She glanced at the stranger next to her, wondering how he could possibly sleep. No matter how hard she'd tried, sleep had escaped her, except for about an hour. The plane began to turn, and she caught her reflection in the window. *Not too bad, I guess.* She thought about brushing her hair, but the space was so cramped that she couldn't reach her backpack without possibly waking her neighbor. She sighed, tipping

back the little clear cup in an attempt to get the last drop of orange juice.

He'd smiled when she'd come down to dinner that night in Plymouth. "You've changed your clothes," he observed brightly. "Did your bag finally arrive?"

They sat at the bar and he'd asked her what she thought of George W. Bush ("I can't stand him. He's destroying my country."). He'd laughed and agreed as they drank their Smirnoff Ices. When he excused himself to mingle with the other tour guests, it was as if the rain clouds from outside had rolled in over her head. She finished her drink, then sat down to eat with the Australian ladies, who were talking about the boat ride they'd all taken earlier. The scenes they described were unfamiliar. She realized she'd been staring at him the entire time.

Southern England had passed by in a blur of St. Ives and Stratford, Bath and Bristol, castles and cathedrals, all blending to backdrop behind him. He was all that she remembered of the country she'd dreamed of visiting for so long.

Still, she worried that she wouldn't be able to spot him in the airport. Or that he wouldn't recognize her. Or perhaps he wouldn't be waiting for her at all, and she'd be left alone to navigate Madrid with only her halting tenth grade Spanish.

"*Can you still love me when you can't see me anymore?*" the female singer asked, and the words seemed to burn in Justine's ears. She clicked her iPod to the next song. Though she had to admit, the singer made a good point. What if they were both in love with a memory? Maybe three years was too long, and all of the emails, phone calls and postcards in the world weren't enough to bridge the time and distance.

Then again, what if everything was just as it had been before? Where would they go from here? Would he ask her to stay with him? She already knew what her answer would be. She would learn Spanish for the second time, learn to like soccer, and learn to wait for him again, until he returned to her from his job in the UK. They'd be two expatriates, finding a home in each other.

She smiled, as equal parts hope and apprehension coursed through her. In her mind, they kissed again outside her London hotel room. She whispered "Stay with me," and wrapped her legs around his waist as he pressed her against the door.

"That's a wonderful, terrible idea, my dear." He kissed her again.

"What's so terrible?" She pulled him closer. "The tour's over. You could just be some guy I met at the bar."

"I should be so lucky." He laughed softly. "I have to catch the Rail and Sail to Dublin in half an hour. The Grand Tour of Ireland starts at 8:00 tomorrow morning. If everyone wakes up on time, that is." He grinned at her.

"Oh shut up!" She laughed, swatting his arm as he set her down and took a step back.

"God, I want to stay," he said, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "You will keep in touch, won't you?"

"I bet you say that to all the cute girls."

"You're more than 'cute,' darling," he said, suddenly becoming serious. "I can't leave without knowing I'll hear from you."

"Of course," she promised. "I'll write you as soon as I get home."

He smiled. "Good." He glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry, I have to go. I'm so late." He leaned in to kiss her one last time. "Safe journey home, all right?"

She nodded. "You too." She watched him hurry down the hall to the stairs, then pause to turn and look back. He seemed pleasantly surprised to see her still standing there, and waved before disappearing down the staircase.

What will it be like to kiss him again? She wondered as the plane finally landed. *To talk face to face instead of across long distance phone lines? To finally have the night we should have had in London?* Her heart was racing now. She couldn't get off the plane fast enough.

Immigration took far too long. "Gracias," she said to the man who finally stamped her passport, then ran to baggage claim, praying that her suitcase would be there. She waited nervously, impatiently, then breathed a sigh of relief as the blue bag with the red ribbon appeared on the carousel. "Lo siento," she called to the other travelers she pushed past as she hurried to grab it. She practically threw her completed customs form at the waiting clerk.

She searched for him amidst the business people talking on mobile phones, the parents with crying children, and the cab drivers. The midmorning sun was blazing through the floor to ceiling windows, and she wondered if it had all taken too long, and he'd given up on her

and gone home. Then she noticed a man dressed in jeans and a white button down shirt standing next to the payphones. He was holding a small sign with the initials "G.W.B." She laughed, stopping to stare for a moment before he had the chance to notice her. His hair was slightly more silver now than blond, but it suited him.

She came just close enough that he could hear her say, "Do you think ol' George would mind if I tagged along?" Elliot turned to her and smiled. "I promise I'll keep my opinions on his foreign policy to mys—"

He put a finger over her mouth. "Do shut up, darling, and just kiss me."

She happily complied.

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ISSN: 2328-613X