

# Variations On a Theme by DeLillo

By Maria O'BRIEN

I'm waiting for him to come home. He's been away for six days and I am lost. People walk around the airport, throwing their voices from underneath surgical masks. I'm sitting at the café, looking at the magazine pretending to be deaf. I put my school books on the table. I don't want to take off the mask, but it's hot around my mouth and nose, the condensation slowly budding around my upper lip. There are men on one side that are throwing their voices, and their voices are muffled but adamant. They appear to be business men, but they hold their sport/travel jackets in their hands, clutching to their lightly-packed carry-ons. They are heading for Ottawa. I know this because just as I hear the boarding call for Ottawa, they stand up.

"There's no way that you could get me to believe that!" one said, wearing a pale blue shirt that matched his mouth cover.

"Oh, well there are all these stats that range from 71% to 94% of all supporters say that it's a good thing!" said another, looking very smart with glasses that moved along with the mask as his voice was thrown higher above the airport noise.

And then a third chimed in, "You have got to be kidding!" I saw the tassels on his loafers quiver with the excitement of this conversation. I was looking down, making sure I didn't make eye contact, and I listen to their voices drift off as another conversation that had been masked by theirs sounds clearer. I tune in with vague curiosity, and begin to circle every third "e" on the page of the airline magazine with my pilot pen, and the ink begins to smudge on my hand so I stop, and idly searching for a new writing utensil.

When moving my eyes from the magazine to my purse, I see that the people of this table do not wear masks, and I think that they will surely be quarantined in the near future. There is a woman, about 48, and a man, about 70, who sit and eat food from the overpriced café.

"I didn't realize this was bread until I took a few bites." I had noticed that she had bleached hair, and was shaped much like a pear. I wonder what the doctors would think of her when she's quarantined. I wonder if her large bottom will affect anything. You never know about that sort of thing. I give up my search for

a Bic pen, and I set to organizing my pile of school books before packing them back into the backpack. I organize them by call number. They do not have call numbers on them, but I have memorized all the PR's for my cataloguing course, and remember what number goes with what author, year, and genre.

"Vat's rrong vith brrread?" The man asked, with over pronounced rr's, and a head cocked to the side. He seemed just as interested in this topic of conversation as the previous table of men had been about the exciting unknown subject. He was old anyhow. I didn't think of him in quarantine like I did the woman. I pictured his grandchildren playing with Gameboys at the funeral. The beep!beep!beep! And the sob! from his daughters wearing black.

"Well, I like bread, but I don't like to eat it much. I prefer to eat other staple foods, like rice." She was wearing multi-coloured boots, and her legs were crossed.

"I like maple flavoured brrread." He was tapping his ticket on the round café table.

"Is that like a loaf, like a banana flavoured bread?" Her mouth was full of airport bread.

"No, its like a brran brrread vith maple flavouur." They must have noted the time, and they got up and the woman threw her sandwich out with only three bites taken out. People stared at them, and they didn't notice that they weren't wearing masks, and that others were. They walked by the station and head for a plane to Vancouver.

I pack up my half-organized books (I gave up on the call numbers, and decided to go with the ISBN numbers printed on the inside cover instead). I wander around the airport looking for him, asking people if they have seen him. What does he look like they ask, and I tell them, average height, average weight, and dark hair. The words float above their heads thrown from somewhere under the pale blue mask, "I think I saw him here just ten minutes ago." The international airport buzzes with disease and people. I see that the two from the table have been held back, and were not allowed on the plane. They wait in a glass booth and are undergoing a preliminary examination before they go on to the hospital. There are men in white suits and white masks and white gloves in the booth with them. I see a

crowd growing around the booth, they watch with a few voices rising up over the top of the crowd. I stare too, but blankly.

I see on the monitor that his flight is here, but is being held on the tarmac. A voice is thrown out into the crowd, "I bet someone didn't wear a mask." I sit and wait for him to get off the plane. My heart is aching and beating faster, praying that he will be healthy and safe. Finally, some men with smiling eyes come off the plane followed by women and single students who are a little more shaken up. A siren is heard, and I look toward the old man and his young girlfriend in the glass case. I can

just barely see his bald head, and one side of her broad behind, because the crowd has gotten so large. Someone grabs me from behind, and I see that it is him. His eyes are smiling, and I can hear it in his voice.

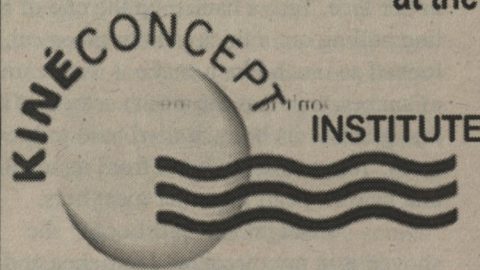
I asked him what happened, and he laughed, "It was only a man who said that he had a knife. He said that he would force us to go to his country and crash the plane, and he took the copilot hostage for the last fifteen minutes of the flight."

"Whew! I'm glad it was nothing serious." I said, hugging him with relief.

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