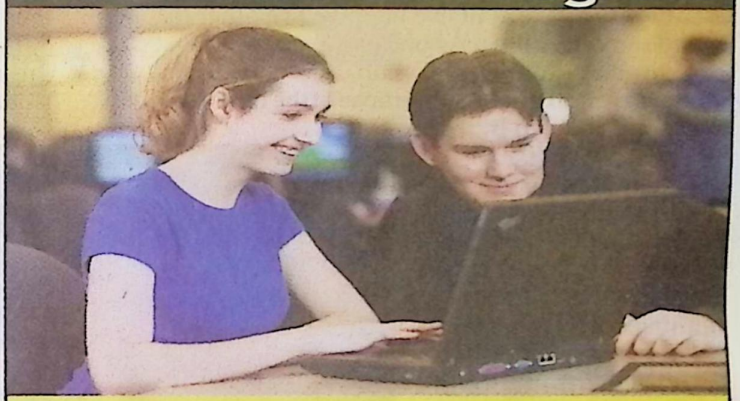
ally closing. When that happens, you run, you trot, panting and perspiring all the while, until you come to that precious gate. You feel a sheepish smile replacing what till now was your face. The gate is still open, people are stepping quietly in. Nothing in life can be more telling, though, than a departure on an aircraft. A soft, unspoken sadness seeps into you. As you settle in, clicking the seat belt around what now seems to be your unseemly girth, you think you see the tears in the eyes of the woman you have just said goodbye to. It may be months, perhaps even years, before you get to gather her in a hug again. Your heart breaks, almost, as the plane lifts itself off the ground.

There are airports which gleam in all the modernity they can command. And yet you do not feel happy being there. In places like Dubai, where materialism has not quite kept pace with the need for sophistication, you ask yourself at the airport why you needed to be there in the first place. There are long queues of people trying to catch their various onward flights. The plane you should be on leaves in thirty minutes and yet that stark truth does not seem to impress immigration there. All that these men are interested in (and they are moving at true snail's pace) is in a traveller's taking off his watch, his shoes and then his belt. It is a most fortunate thing that they do not make you do the next logical thing. If they did, you would surely find yourself, for that first time since you stepped out of boyhood, with your pants down. In places like Dubai, a pretty searing kind of insensitivity, to say nothing of arrogance, is the hallmark at immigration. Once you are finally on the other side of the scanning machine, you come across a whole new scene. Women cannot find their bags earlier placed in the machine; men suddenly realise they are walking off without their keys and their watches. A middle-aged man hollers to a young woman, to tell her she has dropped her ticket and her boarding pass, and only seconds later discovers the horror of his own boarding pass gone missing. It is a perfect situation for a farce. You could even imagine you are watching a movie, or acting out a role in one.

Long ago, their plane having been stranded in a blizzard, Edmund Muskie sat out the cold evening at an airport in New Hampshire. His tired wife placed her head on his lap, her feet stretched to the other end of the bench, and enjoyed a good sleep. Why can't airports around the world recreate such passion between men and women in our times?

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