

The City Where I Found You

by Eric C. Wat

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In June 2006, I was prepared to do a poster presentation in Baltimore about the research that I've been doing for AADAP, one of my consultant clients, at the Research Society on Alcoholism conference. In retrospect, there had been many signs that foreshadowed my trip. First off, Jeanne, an AADAP staff, was supposed to come, too - it was supposed to be our time hanging out and catching up - but she had to back out at the last minute. So I had to go alone.

The day before I left for Baltimore, I got a phone call from our opportunistic academic partner for the AADAP project. One of her colleagues at Charles Drew University couldn't go to the conference. He had a poster presentation like us and he needed someone to put it up at the conference for him. Not much later he called me, begging me to do this favor for him. He said that he received "millions" of dollars in grants from these people who were going to be at the conference and it wouldn't reflect well on him if his wall was empty. I told him I'd do it if he brought the poster to me. He didn't want to drive out to my house, so he met me at the airport the next morning. It turned out to be three poster presentations, not one. He said that he would ask a colleague of his, Dr. Robinson, to look for me at the conference. Fine, I said, a little annoyed. But what could I do then?

Jeanne had booked me a flight into Dulles Airport, even though the conference was in Baltimore. Neither one of us knew Maryland geography well. It turned out Dulles is more than an hour away from Baltimore. Adding that one hour commute on top of my 5-hour-plus flight was a little more than I could take. It didn't help that it was the wettest weekend the East Coast had seen in quite some time.

Then the signs became even more ominous when I arrived at the hotel. I was assigned to Room 667, literally across the hall from the devil's room. The hotel happened to be hosting a Baptists convention. I knew then that I would not be getting any fabulous hotel sex that weekend. I mean, if it was an Episcopalian convention, I might have a chance to bed a minister. Baptists? Forget it.

My conference hotel turned out to be more than a mile away from where I was staying. Ordinarily, it'd make for a good walk back and fro. But not when thunderstorms were holding the city hostage for half a week. On Sunday, I was going to put up the poster and then go back to my hotel for some free time. But because of the downpour, I was trapped at the conference. I did something that I had not done at a conference in a long time: I actually went to a panel. Then I found out the poster presentations I volunteered to mount for someone else were not scheduled until the next day. That meant, I had to trek another mile each way to the conference one more day just to stick some tacks on some stupid paper. Worst of all, it dawned on me that I might know Dr. Robinson from Charles Drew. It was someone that my colleague Megan had tried to set me up with. We had met under the pretense of work, and I wasn't interested. So for the rest of the day, I had to dodge

anyone who might resemble Dr. Robinson, which means any white man with a moustache (that was all I remembered of him), while at the same time he might be looking for me. And unfortunately for me, there were more white male scientists at the Research Society on Alcoholism who sport facial hair than characters in Deadwood.

I noticed there were quite a few cute Asian guys around. But most of the Asians were biologists and would have little to talk about with behavioral scientists like me. Case in point: next to my poster presentation that day was one that discussed a qualitative research project on alcohol consumption among Southeast Asians in the Bay Area. Completely up my alley. Their representatives were two women, one white and the other African American. No Asians from that project. All of them were on the other side of the room talking about DNA.

It was a good thing that I enjoyed alone time. I got to eat some good food, do some writing, and catch up with some reading. I never minded dining alone with a good book, and I was eager to start reading *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers* by Mary Roach, which I bought earlier that year. In fact, I had eaten 3 fresh oysters, a salad, and well on my way of polishing my second crab-cake when I realized that I had been reading about body decay for the past 30 minutes. Yes, this is how much I love food. It's an addiction.

My other consolation was premium cable in my hotel room. I was looking forward to watching *Entourage* on HBO that evening. I'm not a big fan of the show, but I don't get HBO at home, so it made for a treat. The show was barely done with the "previously on *Entourage*" segment when the screen turned dark. The storm had interfered with the satellite, and no one was getting any signal at the hotel. Still early in the evening and having nothing to do, I went down to the hotel bar.

The conference on alcoholism had officially driven me to drinking.

I sat down at the bar, and the woman next to me, a dwarf, struck up a conversation with me. I told her about the TV mishap. We started talking about other favorite television shows. We were comparing our favorite episodes of *Sex and the City* when something hit me. She was hitting on me. I suspected that much because her friends on the other side of her were trying real hard not to engage in our conversation. They were good: I had been slowly isolated! And sometimes we would have these pauses in our conversation, and she would look at me a little too hard. A pick-up stare is like a good fart: they are deadliest when silent. I started thinking how it would be rude of me if I told her that I'm gay. My God, how lame an excuse would that be! She'd think I was lying and that I was turning her down because she was a dwarf.

Of course, this being me, my inferiority complex eventually kicked in. I started thinking, God, did she think I'm an easy lay? I was feeling insulted now. I'm embarrassed to admit it, it was wrong on so many levels. When the TV at the bar started showing pictures, I made my exit and told her I

had to call my girlfriend before I went to bed. I'm still not sure if she's hitting on me. I'm probably imagining the whole thing, but it's Baltimore and it was the Baptists convention weekend. I challenge you to find a more interesting story.

The next day, after I did my good Samaritan deed and some shopping, I was eager to leave Baltimore for DC to visit my brother and his wife. The concierge told me that the MARC commuter train leaves for DC at the Camden Yard station in the morning and late afternoon. Since I missed the morning train, the earliest one I could catch was 3:30 p.m. I arrived at the station before 3 p.m. No one was at the tickets office, but there was a sign that said, after 12 noon, passengers had to buy their tickets on the train itself. I sat and waited. Ten minutes later, Robynn, my African American behavioral scientist neighbor at the poster presentation, showed up. She was heading to DC, too. I told her about the sign but said she should check anyway because this was all new to her too.

Being a thorough person herself, she found a cop, who informed her that the MARC train from Camden Yard station was not running that day because the flooding from the thunderstorms had shut down part of the tracks. We would have to go to Penn Station to catch another train to DC. We were flabbergasted. Where was the sign to alert passengers of this change?! Thankfully, the lightrail that could take us to Penn was next to the train station. When the lightrail stopped at our station, the door wouldn't open. The policeman, now eating his lunch in his car, rolled down his window and yelled at us, Push the button. It turned out the conductor couldn't open the door to the lightrail. We had to do it ourselves. There was a small button on the side, if we read the small print above the button carefully.

We read the map on the train once we got on. Penn Station was about six stops down. We chatted as the lightrail took off. Fifteen minutes later, I realized that we passed Penn Station. How was that possible? Robynn said. She had been watching the stops. We got off and waited for the train going back in the other direction. We checked the map again. And we were right. We got on the train that went the other way and once again, Penn Station was nowhere to be found before we hit the station after it (according to the map). A nice local, sensing our confusion, told us that the lightrail didn't stop at Penn Station exactly and that we needed to take a shuttle to get to Penn Station at the next stop. We quickly got off the train.

The signs at that stop were confusing. There was one that read, Board train here to go to Penn Station, even though we had just gotten off. Another, off the side, had Penn Station with an arrow pointing to the left. There was no sign pointing to a shuttle anywhere. We asked another local. He said it was quicker to walk to Penn from there than to wait for the shuttle. He said we could follow him if we wanted. We wanted. We followed him with our luggage in tow. The sky was about to open up, and he started walking faster. Although he probably didn't mean to ditch us, we almost lost him before we spotted the elusive train station.

We made it to the MARC train at Penn Station in the nick of time. On our way to DC, Robynn and I had a great conversation about community-based research. She told me some gossips about the Research Society on Alcoholism. We had some good laughs. Despite the two days of follies, I felt incredibly lucky. I mean, I could've missed the train to DC altogether and be stuck in Baltimore. But instead, a stranger, whom I barely met the day before, became my trusty companion. For those harried moments, even as I was getting wet from the unending rain, I didn't have to be alone. Truth be told, I was blessed.