By Naomi Shihab Nye

Wandering around the Albuquerque Airport Terminal, after learning my flight had been delayed four hours, I heard an announcement: “If anyone in the vicinity of Gate A-4 understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately.” Well— one pauses these days. Gate A-4 was my own gate. I went there.

An older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like my grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing. “Help,” said the flight agent. “Talk to her. What is her problem? We told her the flight was going to be late and she did this.”

I stooped to put my arm around the woman and spoke haltingly. “Shu-dow-a, shu-bid-uck, habibti? Stani schway, min fadlick, shu-bit-se-wee?” The minute she heard any words she knew, however poorly used, she stopped crying. She thought the flight had been cancelled entirely. She needed to be in El Paso for major medical treatment the next day. I said, “No, we’re fine, you’ll get there, just late, who is picking you up? Let’s call him.”

We called her son, I spoke with him in English. I told him I would stay with his mother till we got on the plane. She talked to him. Then we called her other sons just for the fun of it. Then we called my dad and she spoke for a while in Arabic and found out of course they had ten shared friends. Then I thought just for the heck of it why not call some Palestinian poets I know and let them chat with her? This all took up two hours.

She was laughing a lot by then. Telling about her life, patting my knee, answering questions. She had pulled a sack of homemade mamool cookies— little powdered sugar crumbly mounds stuffed with dates and nuts— from her bag and was offering them to all the women at the gate. To my amazement, not a single traveler declined one. It was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo— we were all covered with the same powdered sugar. And smiling. There is no better cookie.

Then the airline broke out free apple juice and two little girls from our flight ran around serving it and they were covered with powdered sugar too. And I noticed my new best friend— by now we were holding hands— had a potted plant poking out of her bag, some medicinal thing, with green furry leaves. Such an old country traveling tradition. Always carry a plant. Always stay rooted to somewhere.

And I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, This is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate— once the crying of confusion stopped— seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women too.

This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost.
The instructor said,
Go home and write
a page tonight.
And let that page come out of you---
Then, it will be true.
I wonder if it's that simple?
I am twenty-two, colored, born in Winston-Salem.
I went to school there, then Durham, then here
to this college on the hill above Harlem.
I am the only colored student in my class.
The steps from the hill lead down into Harlem
through a park, then I cross St. Nicholas,
Eighth Avenue, Seventh, and I come to the Y,
the Harlem Branch Y, where I take the elevator
up to my room, sit down, and write this page:
It's not easy to know what is true for you or me
at twenty-two, my age. But I guess I'm what
I feel and see and hear, Harlem, I hear you:
hear you, hear me---we two---you, me, talk on this page.
(I hear New York too.) Me---who?
Well, I like to eat, sleep, drink, and be in love.
I like to work, read, learn, and understand life.
I like a pipe for a Christmas present,
or records---Bessie, bop, or Bach.
I guess being colored doesn't make me NOT like
the same things other folks like who are other races.
So will my page be colored that I write?
Being me, it will not be white.
But it will be
a part of you, instructor.
You are white---
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.
That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.
Nor do I often want to be a part of you.
But we are, that's true!
As I learn from you,
I guess you learn from me---
although you're older---and white---
and somewhat more free.
This is my page for English B.