

Paging Catherine Deneuve at Dulles

CHARLES PINNING

When I turned 16, my father changed careers and moved us from the gentle shores of Newport to the raging furnace, the sopping sauna of suburban Washington, D.C., to a place called McLean, Va.

I needed friends. I needed wheels. I needed a job. I started carrying bricks for two bricklayers with the stupid invincibility of youth. With an advance from my father I bought an outrageously dreamy Jaguar Mk. IX "saloon" for \$600 from a retired diplomat in D.C. It was two-tone gray with a sunroof that you threw back with one hand and fenders that swept forward like two waves on either side of the stately chrome bars of the grill. It was basically a sexy Bentley.

At a dance in the basement of a church featuring a band called the Fallen Angels, I met a girl named Jenny. Jenny lived in Middleburg, Va., way out in the country, so we would occasionally meet halfway, at Dulles International Airport, and recline in the sumptuous gray-leather backseat of the Jag and grind lips and hips.

Then Jenny's parents sent her away because she had mental problems, when, in truth it was her parents who had the mental problems, but that's another story.

So, after dumb me carried dumb bricks all day, if I didn't just collapse into bed, I took a shower, put on some nice clothes and drove out to Dulles to pretend I was somebody. I sat in an empty café and drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, watching for arrivals, and then I drove back home and entered the house quietly, hoping that my father wasn't up to smell the tobacco on my breath.

Back then, in 1968, the terminal of Dulles sat all by itself in a pasture in the Virginia countryside of Chantilly. It was a sweeping pagoda-shaped building with a soaring glass front, designed by Eero Saarinen. After driving for 15 miles on the deserted access road that led only to Dulles, you'd come around the bend and there it was, glowing like Oz in the vastness of a dark country night.

Shortly before I discovered it, Dulles had been built as an international airport to absorb the anticipated overflow from National Airport (now Reagan National Airport), just across the Potomac from D.C. in Arlington, Va. But not until years later, when it was absolutely necessary, were people willing to arrive and leave D.C. from an airport more than an hour outside the city.

I took the Jag up to 70... 80... 85 miles an hour with the violet lights over the Blaupunkt radio glowing, smoking a Marlboro, the sunroof back, pulled up to the front of the terminal and entered the cathedral emptiness, crossed the gleaming floor, past the ticket counters of all of the international airlines, taking my post at one of the round café tables that looked out upon the great, empty marble pampas.

The arrival of an Air France flight from Paris was announced. I'd never been to Paris. I'd never been out of the U.S. Minutes later, I watched the travelers appear, well-clad mice wondering which way to turn.

When they had scattered and were gone, I was suddenly seized by a brilliant idea and



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Catherine Deneuve

strode over to the Air France counter.

"Excuse me," I said. "I was supposed to meet someone who was on the flight from Paris, but I do not see them. Could you please page them for me?"

The attendant, not much older than I, in her blue Air France uniform and hat and French accent asked, "What is the passenger's name?"

"Catherine Deneuve," I replied.

"Are you kidding?" she said, her demeanor quite serious, but somewhat interested.

"I am not," I replied pointedly. "I was sent to pick her up. I am becoming concerned."

"One moment," she said.

I returned to my seat at the café table and lit another cigarette. Suddenly, over the P.A. system came the attendant's voice announcing: "Would passenger Catherine Deneuve please come to the Air France counter. Passenger Catherine Deneuve to the Air France counter." And then a bonus I had not anticipated: "Voulez — passager Catherine Deneuve, venez au comptoir d'Air France, s'il vous plaît."

I continued to sit, smoking my cigarette. My life was changing. I was someplace beautiful and something important could possibly happen. Was happening. I took one last sip of my coffee, put out my cigarette and left. The Jaguar, gleaming elegantly pulled smoothly away from the curb.

She, in her official Air France uniform, could have checked the passenger manifest. Maybe she did. In any case, she made the announcement. The complicity of another, a stranger, a young woman behind the counter at Air France, a French woman, the only French person I had ever met, also believed that my dream was possible. Or maybe she was just playing along. Still, I had a new friend! An accomplice! A partner in crime! I had a foreign acquaintance, a Jaguar and a cigarette between my lips in the night, in the country air and my heart was so full!

Charles Pinning is a Providence-based writer.