



4-2013

Checked Bags: A Litany of Potentially Explosive Things

Sherrin Frances
Saginaw Valley State University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.22.03>

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](#).



Recommended Citation

Frances, Sherrin (2013) "Checked Bags: A Litany of Potentially Explosive Things," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 22 , Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.22.03>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol22/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Questions about the journal can be sent to disclosurejournal@gmail.com

**Checked Bags:
A Litany of Potentially Explosive Things**
-Sherrin Frances

Invocation

The small red duffel bag had been pulled from the X-ray machine and placed on a stainless steel table. Based on the X-Ray image, I was pretty sure the alarming item was a bag of sand about the size of a loaf of bread. This was not unusual, given that many people flew to Houston to visit the Gulf Coast or to go on weekend cruises to Cancun. They often brought back sand as a souvenir, as well as other stereotypical “Texas” gifts: bottles of tequila, cans of chili, cowboy boots, sombreros. But the sentimental value of the sand didn't interest me. My mission was to assure that it wasn't explosive sand.

I was working as a Security Officer for the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The primary goal of the TSA is to search for possible explosive devices being smuggled onto a plane, and every suitcase that is checked in at the ticket counter is run through an X-Ray machine behind the scenes. We worked in teams of four. Three officers moved the bags on and off the conveyor belt and ran the X-Ray machine. The fourth person, however, traveled between the two-dimensional transparency of the X-Ray image and the real luggage, physically digging through the bags looking for anything the computer deemed suspicious. This was the most time-consuming, intimate job on the team and usually fell to the low man on the Security totem pole. This person was said to be “EDU:” Elbows Deep in Underwear. I screened checked bags for the TSA for just over a year, and my tenure at the TSA was primarily spent EDU. In that time, I saw a lot of things that blew my mind, but nothing that was actually meant to explode.

Aberration

Within the first hour of my first day, I had my first X-rated alarm. I got the giggles. I had never had a job that required me to handle used sex toys. Pamela, the woman “shadowing” me until I was fully trained, said very matter-of-factly, “Oh yeah, we get a lot of dildos.” This one was the size of my arm. I followed the official testing procedure to determine if it was an explosive dildo. It was not.

Pamela was right. The non-explosive dildo was only one in a long series of unmentionables. Later that day, a bag came through with a suspicious object that was shaped like a slice of birthday cake. Toward the bottom of the suitcase, I felt a plastic baggie with something inside. I pulled it out. It was filmy. I couldn't see what was in there, but it seemed to be the right shape. I held it up and swung it around, looking for the right lighting.

“Is it food?” Pamela shouted from around the machine.

“I'm not sure,” I said. “It might be.” It was the right shape. And the color of chocolate frosting. I squeezed the thing. It was foamy.

“Well does it smell like food?”

“Yeah,” I began to say, “I think—” and then the bag twisted to just the right angle and I could see the front of this thing.

What I was holding up in full view of most passengers in the lobby was an anatomically correct hairless black vagina. I informed Pamela that it was not, in fact, food. She wanted to know specifically what it was.

“It's a toy.”

“What kind?”

“A hairless black vagina.” She had never seen such a toy and came over to my table to check it out.

“Take it out of the bag,” she said. I looked at her.

“Really?”

“Yeah, go on. We've got to see what it really is.”

“I told you what it is.”

“I've never heard of that kind of thing before. How do you know that's what it is?” I just looked at her.

“Well what do you do with it?”

“It's for men,” I said. She called Supervisor Bob over.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before,” she asked. He looked at us both. He nodded. He gave me permission to leave it in the bag while I checked it. Thankfully, the hairless black vagina was not explosive.

I came to learn that some people packed these treasures inside layer after layer of protective shirts and pantsuits. Some proudly left them as trophies on top of their vacation attire. Some tucked them inside of their shoes. One traveler included a note that read, “Attention TSA: These are my toys. Please treat them with respect.” Another person had placed each toy in its own plastic baggie with a label that said, “Clean.” Personally, I was glad to know that. But professionally, it didn't matter what sort of notes were included or how the traveler tried to address me. The security relationship was between me and the potentially explosive object.

And so I quickly experienced a strange flattening out of meaning when it came to luggage, a pervasive equality based on indifference. By the end of my first day, I was professional enough to handle the sex toys just as I handled the chili and sombreros.

Temptation

On my second day, a duffel bag fell off the conveyor belt. It made a popping noise, then it made a hissing noise, and then an unknown liquid began to puddle around the bag. I was frightened, and I immediately called Pamela. She ordered me to maintain control of the leaking bag until Supervisor Bob arrived and they had performed adequate tests on the liquid. About an hour later, once we were relatively sure that it wasn't some sort of biohazard, I put on my latex gloves and opened the bag to find the source. My latex gloves provided only the slimmest barrier between my own skin and the offending object. It was a can of beer. I was relieved. Pamela was disappointed. We put the dripping bag into a large plastic trash bag and taped it closed with official TSA security tape.

While the novelty of the sex toys had worn off fairly quickly, an even bigger surprise had been learning that so many people traveled with food and drink in their luggage. Tamales wrapped in banana leaves were regular alarm items. They were surrounded by cat-hair covered towels that smelled like tamales. Oil-stained workpants that smelled like tamales. Crusty lotion bottles, matted hairbrushes, sweaters, all infused with the odor of hand-made tamales

It wasn't only tamales and cans of beer, though. The bags often included jars of

gooey, creamy stuff which were sometimes cracked and leaking into socks and underwear. Cooked corn. Slabs of beef. Big blocks of frozen fish. Punctured bags of wasabi-covered peas rolling all over the place. It took me longer to adjust to the food than the sex toys.

At one point, management sent a memo out that threatened screeners with their jobs if they did not stop eating food from passenger bags. I must say, I was never tempted to eat the food out of anyone's bag. It left me with an uncanny sense of homemade, nostalgic, memories that had gone rancid and cold.

Vegetation

Toward the end of my first week, a tree came down the belt. It was a silk ficus planted in a ceramic pot and wrapped in a garbage bag. My team turned it on its side and shoved it into the X-ray machine. The tree set off an alarm, and the X-Ray showed some brick-like objects inside the pot. Luis removed the plastic bag and began poking around the fake moss at the base of the fake tree. Everything was glued together and sealed, so it was impossible to see what was inside the pot without breaking it open.

We had the airline begin paging the passenger, and Luis began testing for explosives. The first test set off an alarm. The second test set off an alarm. Pamela called Supervisor Bob over. Bob stood next to me at the base of the X-Ray machine and we watched Luis conduct another test. The airline employees were peeking through the partition opening. The third test set off an alarm.

Supervisor Bob decided we should alert local law enforcement, who would then decide if we needed the bomb squad. Luis maintained control of the tree while we waited. Other officers began to mill around, wanting to know what was going on. "The tree tested positive," one of them whispered, "there's something fishy in the pot." Finally, a police officer arrived with a dog, and as soon as the officer loosed the dog, it began barking and jumping around the tree. There was a bona-fide crowd gathered now. I was a little nervous, but Pamela and Luis were excited. She walked over to me and Bob and said, "Hmm. Might really be something, huh? We might really have something here. Might be something." We all nodded and watched the barking dog.

Eventually, the officer pronounced the tree non-explosive. However, we still could not identify the brick-like things in the pot. Pamela was adamant that we pursue the matter. Supervisor Bob agreed. Almost 45 minutes had passed at this point. Finally, the passenger returned and quickly gave us permission to search the tree. Luis enthusiastically took out all the moss and then cracked the ceramic. After making a big enough hole, he peered into the pot with a flashlight. The fake tree began to lean at an unnatural angle. Luis said that the brick-shaped things were just that: bricks. They were holding the fake trunk upright. Pamela was disappointed. Luis tried to replace the moss over the hole, but most of it fell into the pot. He taped the broken pieces of ceramic to the side of the pot with official TSA security tape. We replaced the trash bag over the branches, put the cockeyed tree on the conveyor belt and apologized to the passenger for the delay. This, I learned, was usually how it went with suspicious items.

Evacuation

About a month after I began checking bags, Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

Soon after, Hurricane Rita hit further down the Gulf Coast. We were the closest major airport to both disasters, so many people evacuated to us, and many connecting flights were diverted to us. Everyone in the airport was frustrated and tense. People were stranded. Pets and babies were howling in every corner of the lobby. The news crews crawled around looking for pathetic faces to interview. For several weeks, when I arrived for my 4 am shift, I had to walk over dozens of people stretched out on the floor trying to sleep.

Behind our partition, however, the luggage kept coming regularly and we kept tossing bags at the usual half-hearted government pace. Most of the bags were overstuffed and chaotic, a simple and tangible reflection of the reality out in the lobby. These people hardly had time to pack at all, much less fold their underwear for the trip.

One morning, a church group arrived to check in for a flight to Louisiana with over thirty cardboard boxes of relief supplies. As usual, I was EDU and was assigned the biggest, most cumbersome box. It was too big to fit through the X-ray machine, so I was told to physically examine everything in it and test anything that looked like it needed to be tested. The box was enormous.

I cut the tape and opened the box flaps. The carton was full of hundreds of tiny baby-food jars wrapped in hundreds of pastel washcloths. Jar after jar of peas and carrots, pureed pumpkin, and mashed bananas. They were delicate. Shiny. Simple. Generous. Heartfelt. And each one was the right density to be considered potentially explosive.

It took hours to inspect, but after I reached the bottom of the carton, the TSA was satisfied that it was nothing but baby food all the way down. I wrapped each jar back into its washcloth and retaped the box. The jars were cleared to continue on their goodwill journey to New Orleans.

Cremation

Soon enough, it was springtime. A very hectic Spring Break week was ending, and at one point I had to check a small duffel bag. It was an innocuous little bag, something that could easily have been carried onto the plane, especially compared to the mammoth bags that most of these vacationing students had with them. The student bags were filled with dirty laundry and liters of souvenir liquor. The computer told me that I was looking at yet another bag of beach sand. It was squeezed in between an old pair of muddy tennis shoes and several cartons of cigarettes. The whole duffel smelled like smoke. I pulled out the bag of sand out and reported to Pamela that I had found it. I noticed some pieces of shell inside the bag and a little card. The card said, "These are the cremated remains of Jose Melendez Rodriguez." I realized those weren't shells, but bits of bone.

"Pamela," I called around the machine, "It's not sand."

"Didn't you just say it was? I've already written it down."

"No, I was wrong. Can you come over here?"

"What is it, then?" she called.

"Can you just come over here?" I could hear her complaining to Luis. Making a change in the alarm log was a hassle. I maintained control over the ashes. As she walked up, I held the bag out for her to inspect. At first she didn't notice, so I pointed the card out to her. "Good lord," she said.

What ensued was a very long discussion among Supervisor Bob, his boss, and the airline supervisor about whether or not Mr. Rodriguez could fly as-is. Eventually, they determined that he was a bio-hazard. If his bag were to be punctured, his ashes could possibly enter the filtration system and ultimately get into the cabin air.

The passenger was called back to the ticket counter and informed that Mr. Rodriguez's ashes would need to be contained in a box of some sort. The passenger found a box at the newsstand next door. Unfortunately, the duffel wouldn't zip with the box inside. Reluctantly, the passenger took out some of the cigarettes. Then more cigarettes. Eventually, Mr. Rodriguez's ashes had displaced all of the cigarettes, but the bag finally zipped.

Pamela crossed out "Sand" in her log and wrote "Ashes." Luis tossed the duffel onto the conveyor belt between a baby car seat and a blue suitcase with wheels. It landed upside down. The X-Ray machine was reset and the TSA was satisfied. I couldn't linger on the moment for long. The next bag had already been tossed onto my stainless steel table. According to the X-Ray, a small Statue of Liberty piggy bank in the outer pocket of the suitcase was potentially explosive.

Resignation

After twelve months of checking bags, I had become exceedingly cynical about the "security" that I provided. I had come to dread the distance and simple-mindedness with which I was required to function. Every time I had to open a bag, there was a rush of adrenaline that THIS would be the bag with a real explosive. THIS would be the bag that put my training to the test. But I was not authorized to evaluate the bag's contents with regard to the passenger's name, the type of bag he owned, or where he was going. Nor was I supposed to evaluate the alarming item in relation to anything else in the bag. I relied solely on the logic of the computer to tell me what to look at. I considered the object merely in terms of its capacity to explode.

When I began my job at the TSA, I was highly suspicious of every unusual thing because it didn't make any sense. A refrigerator box full of ramen noodles and oranges. A ceramic rooster infested with red ants. A TV set cushioned by dozens of mismatched baby shoes. Are they really any more strange and dangerous than vodka and toiletries? Jewelry, shoes and books? Most of the items that initially struck me as such strange things to travel with eventually became the most mundane: In a series of strange things, the strangest thing to see is the common. Targeting these items is all based on the complicated algorithms of modern safety and security and, as with any algorithm, patterns inevitably developed. Everything demanded the same level of suspicion because the computer said so. And so, perversely, when it came to this litany of strange things, the more significant a thing was to the X-Ray machine, the less significant it was to me as a security officer.

Eventually, I resigned from the TSA. But the resignation I still feel, years later, lingers. Every time I travel now, I imagine who is behind the partition. I wonder if she is as resigned as I was to do the job without any context or connection. I want to say that finding human ashes in a passenger's bag was profound on some level, but there weren't any levels to work with. I was surprised to find cremated human remains in a piece of luggage, but quite relieved that they were "just" ashes. In the binary system of explosive/non-explosive,

the ashes passed the test. They were as inert as sand, and when it came to the long line of bags still waiting to be checked, that is all I needed to know. That is all I had time to know. And even today, lingering in the back and the front of my mind, is the notion that the strangest things among us, the most potentially explosive things, are in fact the most banal.