

THE TERMINAL MAN

SIR ALFRED MEHRAN
and
ANDREW DONKIN



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Chapter 1

23rd May 2004 *present form (journal) (copy)*
I am sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport, waiting to leave.

I am waiting for a green card so I can go to America. I am waiting for a British passport so I can go to England. I am waiting for my documentation so I can go anywhere.

I have been sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport waiting to leave for fifteen years.

Charles de Gaulle airport is 30km north of the city of Paris. My red bench is on the lower floor of Terminal One - a slab of 1960s concrete shaped like a doughnut ring.

Behind my red bench, a large glass window looks out onto the little open-air section at the very centre of the ring. It used to contain a fountain spouting water eighteen hours a day. The water kept getting dirty, so a few months ago the fountain was replaced by a garden planted with an uneasy mixture of palm trees and Christmas trees. I do not know if the garden will stay. I like the garden better because it makes less

describing his home

noise than the fountain so it is easier to get to sleep.

Above the new garden, escalators in silver walkways cut across the skyline, carrying passengers towards the planes that sit docked and waiting around the exterior of the terminal. You can get to anywhere in the world from here.

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

A tall woman with a mass of dark hair walks past my bench. I see her looking at me out of the corner of her eye. She is pulling a small suitcase on wheels and carries another bag slung over her shoulder.

I check my clock. It is 10:17 a.m. Around my bench are my possessions – my boxes, my bags, my newspapers. I reach behind my red bench and pick up a wad of A4 paper. On the top page I write: '23rd May 2004' and underline the date.

The tall woman walks past my bench again. She looks over, more obviously this time, hesitates, then pulls her suitcase and walks towards me.

'Excuse me, are you Sir Alfred?'

I tell her yes. She smiles.

'My name is Mandy Pink. Could I . . . could I talk to you for a few minutes?'

I tell her to sit down. In front of my red bench are a round black table and a chair, also from the Bye Bye Bar. When the bar closed down a few years ago, they gave me a special dispensation to keep the bench and the table and chair.

'I understand you've been here for quite a while?'

I nod. 'Fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years? And the whole time you've been . . .'

'Here.' I point to the red bench.

'Did you know you're quite famous?' asks the woman.

I say yes.

'I've just come from Australia. I work for a radio station in Tasmania and I've got a connection to London to catch in two hours.'

I ask her if it's hot in Australia.

She says sometimes.

'I read about you in a newspaper and I wondered if I could ask you a few questions? If you don't mind.'

I tell her I don't mind. I have many visitors. Many people asking questions. She takes out a radio microphone and puts it on the table. Also on the table is a plastic drinking cup; standing inside the cup are two McDonald's drinking straws in paper wrappers, three sachets of sugar, one sachet of salt, two sachets of pepper, one sachet of ketchup, two sets of plastic cutlery – a knife, fork, spoon, napkin – each sealed in a clear plastic wrapper.

'I'm really thirsty. Would you like a drink? A coffee or something?' she asks.

I say I would like an espresso and I tell her where the coffee bar is.

While she's gone I quickly take out my diary page for today and write down her name and what she has said to me. When I see her coming back, I stop writing.

'I didn't have any euros, but luckily they take English pounds.' She smiles and puts down my espresso, then she takes off her coat and leans forward to switch on her recorder.

'How did you come to be stuck here? In the airport?'

She puts the microphone under my nose and I tell her I am here because I do not have the correct documentation to leave. I cannot get on a plane because I do not have a passport, and I cannot leave the airport and go into France because I could be arrested by the French police for being an illegal immigrant and put in jail.

I tell her that in 1987 I was passing through Gard du Nord station, on my way to the airport to catch a flight to England. Gard du Nord is a big main-line station in north Paris, where people change from the metro to the overground lines that go out of the city. I was standing on the platform waiting for a train when I was mugged and my documents were stolen from my bag. I came to Charles de Gaulle anyway and caught my flight to London; in those days you could get on a plane without a passport, but you needed one at the other end. The authorities in London refused to allow me entry to the UK and I was returned straight back to Charles de Gaulle.

'And you've been here ever since?'

'Yes. Without my documents I could not prove who I was or where I should be.'

'How do you ...?'

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

The airport announcement system cuts over the voice of the woman. She grimaces.

'Does that repeat a lot?'

'Every ten minutes.'

'Even at night?'

'Even at night.'

'That must drive you a bit, you know, nuts?'

I nod.

'Sorry, I was asking you, how do you survive? How do you pay for your food?'

'In the beginning some members of the Lufthansa staff gave me food vouchers so I had a regular meal every day. Other companies as well, like Aer Lingus. They were very kind. Sometimes I earned some money by doing jobs for people in the airport, like translating when someone can't speak a language. Lately, I have money from television and film companies. So I can survive.'

'Where do you sleep?'

I point to the red bench. It's two and a half metres long and curved - designed to go round a large table in a bar.

'Is it comfortable?'

'Not really,' I say.

'How did you get to be called Sir Alfred?'

'Alfred was a nickname that I liked and then one day, many years ago, I had a letter from the British authorities which began with a mistake: "Dear Sir, Alfred ..." I told a few people who thought it was funny and the name has kind of stuck since then.'

She asks how I spend my time. People always want to know how I spend my time. Whether it gets boring sitting in an airport for fifteen years on the same bench every day, looking across at the same shop window every day. I tell her it never gets boring. I have many things to do.

'Like what? What's an average day for you?'

'I wake up around 5:30 a.m. every morning. The sun comes in through the windows of the terminal. There are no curtains. I go to the men's washrooms early,

before there is anyone else there, so I can wash myself. There is no hot water so I have to wash myself every morning with cold. I have to be quick because I don't like to leave my possessions unattended. Anything could happen because I am not in a secure area.

'I spent the first eighteen months upstairs in the Departure hall. There was a Burger King up there with benches nearby - very comfortable. I only had one or two shoulder bags then, so I could move around fast. I could sit wherever I wanted in different bars, and different restaurants. I could move very quickly about the terminal, to anywhere I wanted, but over the years I have got more possessions, more bags, so that now it is not so easy. (A more)

'After I have washed, I usually get breakfast on my way back from the washroom. I used to buy a coffee and croissant, French breakfast, from Burger King, but they closed so now I have to get it from McDonald's. The airport starts to get really busy from about 8 a.m., with people coming down into the boutique level to buy newspapers or food.

'In the morning I might listen to the radio - maybe a French news station, to improve my French. Later I might write in my diary for an hour. I record who I see, what happens in the airport, my experiences, big news that I have read in newspapers. I have kept a diary every day since the middle of 1990. Dr Bargain from the Medical Centre gives me new paper whenever I finish a packet. There are four thousand sheets of past years' diaries in the Lufthansa storage boxes.'

I point to a pile of five grey boxes by the side of my bench.

he is like Bill Heby - and other paper men

'At lunchtime I have a Filet-o-fish from McDonald's and maybe an order of fries.'

'Do you have that every day?' says the woman.

'I must be their most loyal customer.'

She smiles.

'What else do you do?'

'In the afternoon, I read a book or a newspaper like the Herald Tribune, and maybe buy another coffee. Sometimes I have a visitor like you who wants to interview me. Sometimes I have a letter or official document that I have to reply to. I used to receive many letters. Whenever there was an article featuring me in a newspaper then I would get mail, from England, from America, from Canada, from people all over the world.'

'So you can receive letters here?' asks the woman.

'Not now. They used to keep my mail at the post office on this floor, and I would go along every few days and collect my letters. The postmaster was very helpful, but a few years ago in 1999 they stopped and now I can't receive mail any more.'

'So you don't get mail from your family? Or from friends?'

'I don't have any family. They are lost.' (home?)

12th April 1955 past

I am a child and there is water dripping down the back of my neck because Kaveh has just hit me with a damp cloth. Kaveh is my friend. He sits behind me in school and sometimes he makes me laugh in a lesson and we get into trouble from the teacher.

Kaveh laughs because now I have water running down the back of my neck.

I say, 'I will get you later.'

I am ten years old and my father has sent me to clean street signs because it is something useful to do. My name is Mehran Karimi Nasser. I live in Masjed Soleiman with my family, where my father is a doctor for the company. The town of Masjed Soleiman is about 1,000km from Tehran in the west of Iran, quite near the border with Iraq.

I take my cloth from the bucket and as I raise my arm I send a spray of water towards Kaveh. He ducks. The sign we are cleaning says 'Naftak', which means 'little oil'. Most of the streets and areas are named after the oil wells. My father says that Masjed Soleiman is a 'company town', which means a whole town that is owned, designed and managed by a single company.

We finish cleaning the sign, pick up our buckets and walk towards the next one. Cleaning signs is a pointless job because everything always gets dirty again.

Masjed Soleiman only exists because of oil. In 1901, an Anglo-Australia prospector called William Knox Darcy bought the first oil concession in Iran. An oil concession is the right to look for and exploit oil in a certain area.

In April 1908, the first oilfield ever found in Iran was discovered at Masjed Soleiman. Darcy formed a company called the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which later became the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company when our country changed its name to be better and more modern.

Before oil was found here, there was no Masjed Soleiman. The area was just barren mountains in a very deserted, mostly unpopulated area, where the only visitors were nomadic Bakhtiyari tribesmen who

brought their herds of sheep to the hills to survive through the winter.

The first oil well that was discovered is called 'Nomre Yek', and sometimes when important people from the company come to Masjed Soleiman, they are driven to the well to look at it as if it is an important shrine.

After the oil was found, a refinery was quickly built, and then the town of Masjed Soleiman was planned and built around the wells and refineries so that workers could live close to their jobs.

Everything in Masjed Soleiman was built by the company: the houses, roads, schools, clubs, cinemas, and the hospital where my father works as a doctor. Being a doctor is a very respected job, although sometimes I think that my mother wishes he did not work there.

A few miles away is Abadan, another oil town also owned by the company. I have been there, when my father went to visit the hospital there. When you drive down from the hills, you can see from that distance that the streets of Abadan are in straight lines and everything is very neat. Masjed Soleiman is completely different because it is built in between hills and mountains, and has to fit around many natural features.

We are cleaning the next road sign which is for the neighbourhood of 'Camp Scotch' when I see Asghar running towards us.

'Come on. Quickly. They've got the bulldozer out!'

He turns and runs back the way he came. I drop my wet cloth and Kaveh and I run after him.

23rd May 2004 present

'You've been in lots of newspapers, but no-one from your past has ever contacted you?'

'No.'

'I read that originally you are from Iran, is that right?'

I tell her no, I'm not from Iran.

'Then where do you come from?'

I shrug my shoulders and she looks puzzled. I tell her that my point of origin has yet to be decided. I don't have any documentation.

'I was sure I'd read that it was Iran?'

I tell her no.

'So you've been living here at the airport for nearly sixteen years? What's the thing you miss the most? You know, about being trapped here. What do you really miss?'

'Marks & Spencer.'

'You mean the English chain store with clothes and food?'

I tell her that they had very nice things and that I miss walking down the shopping aisles and choosing what I would like to buy. There are not many shops in the terminal so I have little selection to choose from.

(neighbourhood)
'Where do you wash your clothes? Is there a laundry here?'

I pick up a suit that is hanging on the back of the red bench. The suit is on a metal hanger and covered with plastic.

'There is a dry-cleaner opposite the restaurant area. I send my clothes there, and they wash and dry them for me and I collect them a week later.'

Would the last passengers for Flight 235 to Los Angeles please report to departure gate seven immediately.

'For free?'

'No, not for free.'

'Is there anything about Charles de Gaulle airport that you like?'

'Eventually, my departure.' - future

She smiles. Behind her I see a man loitering, watching us. He has a shoulder bag, and a large black camera with a silver flash is hanging round his neck.

'When do you think you might be able to leave the airport?'

I tell her I do not know. I have no passport. I cannot leave until I have the correct documentation.

'And where would you like to go when you do leave?'

I tell her that I'd like to go to maybe Florida or California.

The woman looks in her notebook to check that she has asked all her questions; then she checks her watch.

'Listen, thank you so much, you've been really helpful. I'd better get over to Terminal Two for my flight to London. When I get back to Tasmania in a couple of weeks I'll cut that tape into a radio interview.'

She stands up and we shake hands.

'Be seeing you.'

Behind her, the man with the camera is edging forward one step at a time, worried about intruding, but eager for her to leave.

She turns around to go and sees him. They exchange awkward smiles.

'Oh, are you waiting for...'

She says goodbye again and leaves, disappearing

around the corner with her suitcase on wheels following behind.

The man comes closer.

'Excuse me, are you Sir Alfred?'

I tell him yes. He smiles.

'My name is Donald Trask from Sentinel Radio. Could I . . . could I talk to you for a moment?'

I tell him to sit down. In front of my red bench are a round black table and a chair, also from the Bye Bye Bar. When the bar closed down a few years ago, they gave me a special dispensation to keep the bench and the table and chair.

'I understand,' says the man, 'you've been here for quite a while?'

I nod.

'Fifteen years.'

'Fifteen years? And the whole time you've been . . .'

'Here.'

'Did you know you're quite famous?' asks the man.

Diary extract

'8:05 a.m. I go to the washroom to shave and brush my teeth. Usually it is empty but today it is full because man says there is training course on third floor and their washroom is broken. I hope men will go soon. I like it quiet.'

Interlude in his home -

Chapter 2

23rd May 2004

I am sitting on my red bench from the Bye Bye Bar in the middle of Charles de Gaulle airport, waiting for a man I don't know at all to start asking me questions.

His name is Donald Trask from Sentinel Radio in Philadelphia. He has a fat face, white shirt, blue jeans, and looks like a dentist.

'Do you mind if I tape this?'

Donald Trask takes a mini tape recorder from his bag and places it on the table. It is the kind that takes very small batteries. You cannot buy batteries of that size in the airport. You can only buy them in a shop through passport control.

People always want to know the same things.

Why do you stay in the airport? How did you get stuck here? How do you survive? How do you pay for

your food? Where do you sleep? Is it comfortable? What's an average day for you? Do you really have a Filet-o-fish every day? What else do you do? What's the thing you miss most? When do you think you might be able to leave the airport?

Donald Trask from Sentinel Radio wants to know these things as well.

'And how did you get to be called Sir Alfred?'

I tell him the answer.

'When you were much younger, did you have any ambitions? Something that you wanted to do?'

edu
'I have a degree in psychology. I used to think that I would like to have practice with patients coming,' I say.

'So you wanted to help people?'

'Yes.'

'You've been stuck in the airport for such a long time. Does that make you angry?'

ged
I shake my head. 'Not angry. I just want to know my point of origin.'

'Could you tell me something about your childhood in Iran? Where did you grow up?'

I shake my head.

'No.'

'But you are from Iran?'

I shake my head again.

ged
Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

'No, my point of origin is not decided.'

Donald Trask looks confused.

'I am not Iranian. That was a false identity.'

Donald Trask looks more confused. He looks at his notebook, then gives up.

'Would you like a coffee?' he asks. 'I'm going to have one.'

I shrug my shoulders. 'Espresso.'

When he's gone I quickly take out my diary page for today, but I don't start writing because I have something else on my mind.

12th April 1955 *part*

'Quickly!'

Kaveh and I run with as much speed as we can. Cleaning street signs can wait. It does not take the bulldozer long to do its job and we will miss it if we are not quick.

Asghar, running in front of us, turns his head and shouts over his shoulder. 'They're in the wastes by Nomre-e Chehel.'

'Nomre-e Chehel' means Number 40 - the fortieth oil well to start producing.

We run around the back of the sports club and along the fence at the bottom of the swimming pool, because this way we do not have to go past the guard post standing sentry at the entrance to the only road to Nomre-e Chehel. Masjed Soleiman is set out so that different neighbourhoods are only connected with other parts of the town by narrow company-built roads. The land around the town and between neighbourhoods is just rough hillside.

Ahead of us we can see the crowd that has gathered. In the middle are grown-ups, with the children dancing around the edge of the group. I put my hand under my shirt. I run my finger along the scar on my stomach, where the knife cut me after people got angry when I told them what they should say.

All eyes are looking down into a small valley where the land falls away from the road. A land manager is halfway up the valley side directing a rusty and dirty bulldozer. The machine's tracks are sliding on the valley's muddy side and it is struggling to get a grip. The driver is pushing the gears into place – a movement that takes all his strength. Along the side of the valley slope is the bulldozer's target – a series of half a dozen ramshackle huts.

In Masjed Soleiman, the formal area of the town is laid out and planned by the company. Weaving between the formal areas are company roads, twisting and turning around the seven hills that make up the area. The formal areas have names that sound like England, such as 'Camp Scotch' and 'Western Hotel'. Outside the formal areas, places have local names like 'Sar Koureh' which means 'by the smokestack'.

Masjed Soleiman attracts many migrants looking for work. Sometimes people decide to stay in the hope of getting a job, or sometimes the company has a waiting list for houses. When this happens, the people build their own rough and ready homes. But the company does not like this because it undermines their control and so they order what is happening today. They order the bulldozer to go in and destroy the homes.

That is what we have come to watch.

23rd May 2004

'Alfred?'

I look up. Donald Trask is back at my table. The table is from the old Bye Bye Bar. They let me keep my red bench and my table because of special dispensation.

Donald Trask switches on his mini tape recorder again. It makes a faint whirring noise that you can only hear if you listen carefully and if there is no-one walking by with a trolley that squeaks loudly.

'Did you have any brothers or sisters when you were growing up in Iran?'

I shake my head.

'So you didn't have any brothers or sisters, right?'

The nail on the index finger of my left hand is longer than the rest of my fingernails; I rub it over my lower lip so that I can feel how smooth it is. I do this several times.

'Maybe. I don't know,' I tell him.

I pick up a newspaper and open it. It is a copy of *The Times* from yesterday.

I hold my newspaper up and start reading an article. Donald Trask sits in silence somewhere on the other side of the pages.

12th April 1955

In the beginning, the people built their homes on the flat ground, but the bulldozers always knocked them down easily. Now they build their huts in steep valleys, or by a cliff or a flood channel.

The man in the bulldozer grapples with the gearstick to force it into reverse. The tread spins through the mud without getting a grip and the machine shudders but does not move. I do not think that it will be able to climb the side of the valley, so the houses will not be destroyed.

In a company town, a person's place and the kind of house they have depends on what job they do. There are many different clubs: one for senior staff and

managers, one for junior staff, one for workers. My father is a doctor in the hospital, which is a good position to have, so we have a good house. In Masjed Soleiman everything depends on your rank. Workers and senior staff even have separate cemeteries for when they are dead.

The bulldozer strains against the side of the valley, but it is too steep. People watch and do not know whether they should cheer or be sorry. All of them work for the company and they must be careful. I hear a grating sound and around the corner of the hill comes another bulldozer. I recognize this one; its front is charred and burned. My father told me that they use it if there is a fire at one of the oil wells, to put the fire out.

The crowd watches as the bulldozer gets closer.

'This big one will get them,' says Asghar. His father also works in the hospital, but he is not a doctor, he is a cleaner.

The bulldozer leaves the road and heads up the valley side, passing the other stranded machine. Its thick tread bites into the steep slope and it slowly, slowly crawls up towards the huts that have appeared there. A woman in the crowd suddenly lets out a wail and holds her hands over her eyes.

Passengers are reminded to keep their personal baggage with them at all times.

The bulldozer touches the lowest hut and the entire structure collapses immediately. It smashes through what is left of the wall and careers through the other three structures as if they were made of paper. The remains of the shacks slide down the valley side; some pieces are so light that they nearly blow away in the

wind. In the crowd the woman is still wailing. This is usual.

The crowd starts to move off.

'Beat you to the bucket!'

Kaveh starts to run back to Camp Scotch. He looks behind, to make sure I am chasing him. I put my head down and run.

23rd May 2004

I turn over another page in my newspaper and begin to read an article about ex-President Clinton; it says that he is preparing a book about his life story. I am very interested in politics and if they have that book for sale in the newsagent's, I will buy it, although they only sell French-language version so I will need my French/English dictionary to assist me to read it.

'Alfred?'

I lower the newspaper and look at Donald Trask. He has turned off his mini tape recorder because no-one has been talking.

'Do you know that there is a film coming out that's based on your situation? A Steven Spielberg film?'

'Yes, of course. I signed the contract with Steven Spielberg-Dreamworks four years ago.'

'Not everyone gets to have Steven Spielberg make a film about their life.'

'No, of course not. Hollywood wanted to make a film about my situation because it is very unusual. It's not normal, living in an airport for fifteen years,' I tell him. 'It's a strange situation.'

'I've got an article about the film. Would you like to see it?'

I say, 'Yes,' but even if he shows me article about the Steven Spielberg film, I am not going to talk about being in Iran because I am not Iranian.

Donald Trask reaches into his black shoulder bag and takes out a copy of a magazine called *London Eye*. On the cover is a picture of the skyline of London with five coloured circles over it and the heading: 'The Olympics: Why We Need to Win'. Underneath in big letters it says, 'What Spielberg Did Next'.

Donald Trask opens the magazine to the correct page and gives it to me. This is what I read:

Adventures in Limbo
By Mike Fillis

Steven Spielberg's latest project is about Viktor Navorski, Balkan tourist, who becomes stranded at a major US airport when a political coup occurs in his homeland whilst he is flying to America, leaving him with an invalid passport and no means to return to his country.

Viktor must remain within the neutral territory of *The Terminal*, trapped until the great bureaucratic mechanism grinds sufficiently to determine his legal status and rescue him from the twilight zone of international limbo. Like Spielberg's other famous lost passenger, E.T., Viktor soon learns how to make friends and influence people.

Spielberg's first thought was to make the film on location. 'I originally wanted to shoot this at a real airport, but in the shadow of 9-11 it would be really impossible with all that security to bring in 125 crew members and 1,500 extras. It would have been a

little impractical,' laughs the Oscar-winning director.

Instead, Spielberg found himself overseeing a huge construction project to build a full-size modern terminal akin to New York's John F. Kennedy - complete with four working escalators, fully staffed food outlets, and a host of product-placed retail outlets. 'It's the second largest set ever made for one of my films; the only set bigger was the one where the mothership landed in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind!*'

No expense was spared to replicate the modern aeronautical terminus of today, which was housed in 10,000 square meters of glass supported by 650 tonnes of steel and shrouded in a white Ultrabounce cloth to suggest the glare of daylight. Real luggage conveyors and working departure displays were installed along with a gamut of fully stocked food outlets that kept the myriads of 'passengers' fed. Only the skyborne airliners were added digitally in postproduction.

If Spielberg seems to have swapped illegal aliens from space for illegal aliens from the Balkans, it's perhaps because he was inspired by the extraordinary real-life odyssey of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, better known as Sir Alfred, and his sixteen-year layover at Charles de Gaulle airport just outside Paris. Trapped there without the documentation that he needs to leave the airport or catch a flight, Sir Alfred has lived for sixteen years (since August 1988) on the same red bench. He has eaten a McDonald's Filet-o-fish for lunch every single day of his long wait.

Sir Alfred's story first reached Hollywood in 1995, but being an idea rather than a story it took a while for it to be shaped into a working screenplay, let alone one

Compare to actual limits of freedom for a very
secure person) as described by Bauman - lack of others and

odd opportunity to re-locate self - had long, water in family.

which would attract the very cream of Hollywood talent like Spielberg and Hanks.

The story's co-creator Andrew Niccol (*The Truman Show*) explains that the similarity ends there and that it took months of careful craftsmanship by the film's writers, Sacha Gervasi and Jeff Nathanson, to take Sir Alfred's situation and turn it into a story. Tom Hanks's character certainly has an eventful time as he falls in love with a Nebraskan flight attendant played by Catherine Zeta-Jones and becomes entangled in the copious red tape of US customs official Frank Dixon (Stanley Tucci). Dixon is the 'villain' of the piece since he considers Viktor to be a potential security risk, but he must also accord the refugee all the rights of a democratic society.

Nevertheless, Steven Spielberg said that 'because Sir Alfred is the only other person, to our knowledge, living quasi-permanently at a major international airport, we thought it would be prudent to buy the rights to his story.' The deal, rumored to be around \$300,000 and a cut of the box office, is generous by any standards and has ironically given the stranded Iranian the financial freedom to do as he pleases.

Iranian
Freedom

The tag line for the film's poster is 'Life is Waiting' - for Viktor the implication is that it's waiting outside the Terminal if he can only defeat the bad guy and get out to it. As far as the real Sir Alfred is concerned though, for him the actual process of waiting is life and has been for sixteen years.

Tom Hanks is no stranger to the lonely leading role, having played a lost desert islander in *Cast Away*. There he was truly alone, devoid of food, water, shelter, and, above all, company. *The Terminal* brings

a loneliness of another kind - one of isolation in an antiseptic, self-sustaining microworld that promises excitement and adventure further afield, the loneliness felt amongst indifferent crowds deeply intent on being elsewhere. It is the loneliness of the itinerant, of the homeless whom people do not wish to see.

In this serious comedy - as producers Walter Parkes and Laurie MacDonald are wont to describe it - Viktor is shown in detail living his daily routine, eating, washing, surviving, and touching the lives of those fleeting travelers who cross his path.

Hanks always seems able to mine that vein of likeability from the depths of the eccentric characters he portrays. Spielberg says of his star: 'He entertains me. Sometimes I just sit by the monitor and stifle the laughter so that it doesn't ruin the take he's doing. I just love his improvisational skills.' *Terminal!*

Of particular joy to Hanks, and a prime cause of Viktor's communication problems with the rest of the airport, is his accent and phraseology. Hanks studied this in detail with a dialect coach and claims he struggled with a largely Bulgarian accent - making every effort, he says, not to end up sounding like Dracula. The end result in the movie is both convincing and frequently very funny.

It's a peculiarity of this particular production that the many, many hours actors would normally have to idle away, waiting for camera to be set up and lighting to be rigged, were spent browsing through the real bookshops and duty free shops that had been built on set to provide the verisimilitude of Viktor's world. At one point, Catherine Zeta-Jones was spotted in the newsagent's, hiding a magazine with her on the cover

so that it wouldn't appear in shot in the next scene.

Hanks describes it as 'the antithesis of working on most movie sets which are usually hot and dusty' and riddled with cables. The whole experience of making *The Terminal* was actually more like waiting for your connecting flight at a real airport. 'You have a few phone calls you can make, you sit back, you wander around and you actually kind of enjoy it.' Unless, of course, you're the real Sir Alfred, in which case it might be some considerable time before that connecting flight actually arrives.

I turn over the page and there is a picture of a man I don't know smiling, and a heading that says: 'Ron Fogelman, British Producer tells us - "Why Brits are Hits in Hollywood".' This is another film article but not on Spielberg.

'What do you think of it?' asks Donald Trask.

'I don't have Filet-o-fish every day for sixteen years,' I tell him. 'That's wrong. I have only eaten it since they opened, maybe nine years.'

Diary extract

'8:15 p.m. Workers in the CD shop arrived early this morning and began to put Christmas decorations in the window. Looks pretty. I hope they do not have flashing lights like last year. Look nice, but very hard to sleep with flashing lights at night.'

Chapter 3

23rd May 2004

Donald Trask from Sentinel Radio in Philadelphia is still asking me questions. He still has a fat face, white shirt, blue jeans, and he still looks like a dentist.

Donald Trask switches on his mini tape recorder again. It makes a faint whirring noise that you can only hear if you listen carefully and if there is no-one walking by with a trolley that squeaks loudly.

'I just need a few details of your background in Iran for my story. For example what kind of house did you live in?'

I wave my finger.

'I cannot talk about that. I never agreed to be interviewed about that. I will only talk from time of