

A Terminal of Memories by Rudy Keane

From a distance, the airport looks normal. Huge planes lining the taxiways. A fancy airport terminal, with a wave-shaped roof and tall poles holding up spacious balconies. Glass windows, spanning the perimeter of the building. A colossal control tower, concave concrete columns holding up a flying saucer-like viewpoint.

But as you get closer, the abandoned state of the airport becomes apparent. The roof is caved in in some places, and the poles around the outside of the structure seem impossible – surely they should have collapsed by now? Almost all of the windows are smashed, gigantic shards of glass littering the dirty concrete below. And the control tower creaks, seemingly moments away from tumbling onto the building below.

A thousand acres of land stretching as far as the eye can see, the ground a mixture of perished brown grass and cracked concrete panels, painted with fading yellow and white markings. An asphalt runway, dilapidated as well, is littered with old planes falling apart.

Inside the ruined terminal building, it is just as eerily quiet as the plane graveyard a few hundred metres away. The only noise is the warm wind blowing through doors and holes in the walls. Does that wind remember the glory days of this deserted building?

The centre of the building is taken up by rows and rows of black leather chairs. A layer of grime rests on top of them, and as the wind blows in from an open door, more falls from the crumbling ceiling.

This abandoned building tells a story, though. Behind the damage and decay of the terminal, the history and legacy of this airport has been preserved. A split-flap departures board held up by two deteriorating poles shows the flights set to depart all those years ago. Did they ever take off, or arrive at their destination? We'll never know. What stories did the passengers hold? Were they travelling to London to visit grandparents? Or to Milan to meet up with a childhood friend? Were they returning to their family after years apart?

On one of the leather seats in the centre of the building is a teddy bear with a red bow around its neck. Stuffing was spilling out a hole in its side. Perhaps it belonged to a young passenger, flying home after a holiday with her family. What happened to her and her family, on that fateful day all those years ago? That day when happiness and excitement to travel unwillingly gave way to fear and distress.

A few metres from the frayed teddy bear is an unfinished letter, the pen scattered on the floor and the ink barely clinging onto the paper, almost entirely faded by rays of sunlight streaming through gaps in the ceiling. The letter gives an insight into the past. A young woman, excited to fly, and to finally go home and see her parents.

In a cafe on the edge of the building, ancient ceramic plates are sitting on a colourful marble table, any traces of food now gone to nature. A banner, which may once have hung from the ceiling, is sprawled on the floor. It reads 'Happy Birthday' in bold, colourful text, dulled by layers of dust. Perhaps someone was having a holiday to celebrate an important birthday. A few half-opened presents are on the table beside the plates. A camera, to be used to take photos whilst on holiday, a swimsuit to wear whilst enjoying a visit to the beach.

Memories and stories of the uncertainty and turmoil from those long-ago times may have been lost, but in a way, this airport has preserved a tiny sliver of them.

Where are these people now? Are they, and their memories, gone forever?

On the runway, a rusting Air France Boeing 727 appears to have been ready for takeoff. Its two side engines have fallen off the rear of the plane, and the nose wheel has collapsed, leaving the front of the aircraft resting on the asphalt. All the doors are open, and now-deflated grey emergency slides either hang off the side of the plane, or lie in a mess below it. Were the passengers onboard frightened for their lives, desperate to escape? Scared by the looming turmoil and disaster that endangered the airport so much it had to be abandoned forever?

While we may never know the full story of the perilous events that occurred here, the small glimpses into the past we do get from this derelict location help us imagine what might have happened. What journeys were never had, what stories were never told. What lives were lived, and what memories, whether good or bad, were made.