

Have you packed your own suitcase?

by Theodore Dalrymple

No time or society, I imagine, is entirely without its ironies or contradictions. For example, we are horrified by the sexual abuse of children but all our social policy over the last fifty years has been to maximise it. We would, in practice, be far more horrified by attempts to reverse that policy than any amount of such abuse. We prefer to erect (and pay for) vast and ineffectual bureaucracies whose ostensible aim is to counteract the natural consequences of those policies.

I noticed another such irony or contradiction the other day at a British provincial airport. It was in that fifty-eighth circle of Hell that you have to go enter and pass through once you have passed through security, namely the array of duty-free or tax-reduced shops that sell luxury consumables, each shop with its own throbbing pop music, in an attempt to induce a state of trance in you and destroy your judgment, temptresses approaching you and asking whether you want to try the new fragrance by Gianfranco Tortellini or Marcantonio Tagliatelle.

As I was passing through this inferno, I noticed that there was a marble screen with a notice with an arrow and which said *Tobacco and Cigars this way*. The screen led to a hidden passageway as if what were being sold at the end of it were dirty postcards (but pictures far more explicit than those on old-fashioned dirty postcards were on sale at every newsagent in the airport).

Is it not curious that the purchase and consumption of tobacco should be pushed into semi-clandestinity at the very time when pressure is mounting to make cannabis as freely available as

(say) coffee? A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, no doubt, but it is odd that we accept new and blatant inconsistencies without noticing, let alone protesting them.

There are other inconsistencies to be observed in airport. It is fascinating to watch fully-veiled mothers leading their sons dressed in a baseball cap worn sideways, T-shirts, jeans and trainers through the labyrinth of consumerism. And then I listened to some girls, obviously on a trip from a rather superior school, discuss between themselves the vexed question of make-up.

'I never wear it at school,' said one. 'In fact I never wear it.'

'I don't either,' said another. 'Except I sometimes have my eyelashes lengthened, like my dad does. He says you have to have it done every few months.'

First published in