

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #330

Stuck in Transit: Can You Actually Live in an Airport?

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

Inspired by a listener's prompt, Herman and Corn Poppleberry dive into the fascinating and tragic history of Mehran Karimi Nasseri, the man who lived in a Paris terminal for 18 years. They contrast his experience with the high-tech reality of 2026, where facial recognition and "dwell time" AI make staying off the grid nearly impossible. From the psychology of "non-places" to the logistical nightmares of airport pricing, this episode explores whether the ultimate travel nightmare is actually a survivable reality.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

I've been thinking about the movie *The Terminal*, which is based on a true story about someone living in an airport for years. I've often wondered if you could stay in an airline terminal indefinitely, as they have everything you need: places to sleep, food, and internet. I'd love to learn more about the true story the movie is based on. Herman and Cory, do you think we could camp out in an airport indefinitely? How long do you think it would take before authorities noticed? Let's discuss what life would be like living in an international airport.

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. I am Corn, and I am joined as always by my brother, Herman Poppleberry.

Herman

Hello, hello. It is good to be here. I am feeling particularly caffeinated today, Corn. I think I am ready to dive into some deep lore.

Corn

That is good to hear, because our housemate Daniel sent us a prompt that is basically the ultimate nerd fantasy or maybe the ultimate travel nightmare, depending on how you look at it. He was asking about the movie *The Terminal* and the true story behind it. He wants to know if it is actually possible to live in an international airport indefinitely.

Herman

Oh, man. Daniel really hit the nail on the head with this one. I have actually spent a ridiculous amount of time reading about the real Terminal Man. It is one of those stories that sounds like an urban legend, but the reality is even stranger and a lot more poignant than the Tom Hanks movie.

Corn

Yeah, I remember the movie being pretty lighthearted and quirky, but the actual history seems a bit more complex. Before we get into whether we could pull it off ourselves, tell me about the guy who actually did it. Who was he?

Herman

His name was Mehran Karimi Nasseri. He was an Iranian refugee who lived in Terminal One of the Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris for eighteen years. Let that sink in for a second. Eighteen years. From nineteen eighty eight until two thousand six.

Corn

Eighteen years in a terminal. I get cranky after a three hour layover. How does someone even end up in that situation? Was it a legal loophole?

Herman

It was a perfect storm of bureaucratic chaos. Nasserri was essentially caught in a legal limbo. He claimed he had been expelled from Iran for protests, and he was trying to get to the United Kingdom. But on the way, he said his briefcase with his refugee documents was stolen. When he landed in Paris, he did not have papers, so he could not enter France. But since he did not have papers to show where he came from, they could not deport him either.

Corn

So he was stuck in the international zone. It is like the world's most boring waiting room, but you can never leave.

Herman

Exactly. And even when the French and Belgian governments eventually offered him residency papers years later, he actually refused to sign them for a while because they did not list him as being British or by his preferred name, Sir Alfred Mehran. He had integrated his identity so deeply into the airport that he almost became a part of the architecture. And here is the truly poetic, if tragic, part: after years of living in shelters and hotels, he actually moved back to the airport in 2022-2023. He died right there in Terminal 2F of a heart attack at the age of 77. He literally spent his final weeks in the only place that felt like home.

Corn

That is fascinating. It sounds like he developed a sort of institutionalization within the airport itself. But Daniel's question is really about the logistics of it. If we were to try this today, in January of twenty twenty six, could we actually survive? Airports have changed a lot since the late eighties.

Herman

They have changed massively. Back in Nasser's day, security was a lot more lax. He had his little corner of the terminal with his luggage and his bench. He would wash in the public bathrooms, and the airport staff would actually bring him food and newspapers. He was a local celebrity. Today, if you tried to set up a permanent residence in Terminal One or any major international hub, you would be dealing with a completely different level of surveillance.

Corn

Right, let's look at the infrastructure first. Daniel mentioned that airports have everything you need. Food, water, internet, and places to sleep. On paper, it looks like a high end hostel. But if you are airside, meaning you have passed through security, you usually need a boarding pass to be there.

Herman

That is the first major hurdle. You can buy a cheap ticket to get airside, but once that flight departs, you are technically in the terminal without a valid reason to be there. Most international airports clear out sections of the terminal at night for cleaning or security sweeps. If you are just sitting there with no luggage and no upcoming flight on the departures board, you are going to stick out like a sore thumb to the automated systems.

Corn

That is a great point. We should talk about the technology. We are not just dealing with security guards on foot anymore. In twenty twenty six, almost every major international terminal is equipped with advanced facial recognition and behavioral analysis AI.

Herman

Oh, absolutely. We are talking about systems like LiDAR and computer vision that track every single person's path from the curb to the gate. These systems are designed to look for anomalies. If the system sees the same face in the same zone for more than twenty four hours without that person boarding a plane, it is going to flag you. It is called dwell time monitoring. They use it for marketing to see how long people stay in duty free shops, but security uses it to find people who might be casing the joint or, in our case, trying to move in.

Corn

So the AI would catch us before a human even noticed. It would see our movement patterns. We would be pacing, looking for the best outlets, or trying to find a quiet corner to sleep. That kind of repetitive behavior is a massive red flag for modern security algorithms.

Herman

Not to mention gait analysis. Even if you cover your face, the way you walk is a biometric signature. If you are living in a terminal, your gait changes. You are tired, you are shuffling, you are carrying the same bag. The system knows it is you. Plus, with the rollout of single token journeys where your face is your passport, the airport knows exactly who is supposed to be where at all times.

Corn

Okay, so airside is probably a no go for more than a couple of days. But what about landside? The public area before security. Many airports are open twenty four seven. You have the check in counters, some cafes, and the arrivals hall. People wait there all the time for delayed flights or to pick up relatives.

Herman

Landside is actually where a lot of people who are experiencing homelessness end up, especially in cities with harsh climates. But airport police are very attuned to this. They have specific protocols for identifying people who are loitering versus people who are traveling. They look for what they call travel intent. Do you have a suitcase? Is it packed for a trip or does it contain your entire life? Do you have a confirmation number?

Corn

I wonder about the cost, too. Daniel mentioned that they have everything you need, but airport prices are astronomical. If you are eating three meals a day at an airport cafe, you are going to burn through your savings in a month. Unless you are working there?

Herman

That would be the ultimate hack. If you got a job at one of the airport restaurants or as a janitor, you would have a reason to be there every day. You would have a staff ID. You could probably find a storage closet or a mechanical room to sleep in if you were really clever. But that is not really living in the terminal as a guest; that is just a very extreme case of living at the office.

Corn

It reminds me of those stories about people living in storage units or in the crawl spaces of shopping malls. There was that famous case in Providence, Rhode Island, where a group of artists built a secret apartment inside a mall and lived there for years. They actually just released a documentary about it in twenty twenty four called Secret Mall Apartment.

Herman

I love that story! Michael Townsend and his crew lived in that seven hundred and fifty square foot space for four years. They had a sofa, a television, and even a china cabinet. But a mall is not a high security border crossing. An airport is a different beast. You have customs, border protection, local police, and private security all overlapping. You are not just hiding from a mall cop; you are hiding from national security agencies.

Corn

Let's talk about the psychological side of this. Even if you could evade the cameras and afford the ten dollar bottles of water, what does it do to a person to live in a liminal space? We have talked about liminality before, that feeling of being in between places. An airport is the definition of a non place.

Herman

It really is. Anthropologist Marc Auge coined that term, non place. It is a space that does not hold enough significance to be regarded as a place. It is purely functional. There is no history, no identity, no relations. Living there would be like living in a vacuum. You are surrounded by thousands of people, but they are all in transit. Nobody is staying. You are the only stationary object in a world of constant motion.

Corn

That has to be incredibly isolating. In the movie, Tom Hanks' character makes friends with the staff, and they become his community. But in a real modern airport, the staff are often overworked, rotating through shifts, and discouraged from fraternizing too much with people in the terminal. You would be a ghost.

Herman

And the environment itself is hostile to human biology. Think about the lighting. It is that constant, bright, fluorescent hum. It never gets truly dark. Your circadian rhythms would be completely destroyed. Then there is the noise. The constant announcements, the rolling suitcases, the jet engines in the distance. You would never get deep sleep.

Corn

Plus the air. It is all recycled and pressurized. You never feel the wind or see the sun unless you are looking through thick, tinted glass. I think after a week, I would be losing my mind. I would be craving the smell of rain or just the feeling of grass.

Herman

Nasseri actually had a very difficult time when he was finally allowed to leave. After eighteen years, he was so used to the terminal that he struggled to adapt to the outside world. As we mentioned, he ended up moving back to the airport shortly before he died. He went back to the only place that felt like home, even if it was a place designed for people who were leaving.

Corn

That is so incredibly sad, but also a testament to how the human brain can adapt to almost anything. He turned a non place into his entire world. But what about other cases? Nasseri isn't the only one. Didn't Edward Snowden spend a long time in a Russian airport?

Herman

Yes, Snowden was in the transit zone of Sheremetyevo Airport in Moscow for about thirty nine days in twenty thirteen. He was in a similar legal limbo because the United States had revoked his passport while he was mid air. He could not enter Russia, and he could not fly anywhere else. But thirty nine days is a far cry from eighteen years.

Corn

It seems like the airport becomes a tool for political leverage in these cases. You are making yourself a visible problem that the authorities have to deal with every single day. You are literally a personification of a bureaucratic error sitting right in the middle of their sparkling clean terminal.

Corn

So, to answer Daniel's question, if we were to try and camp out in an airport indefinitely, how long before we got noticed? I think if we were smart, we could probably last seventy two hours before someone started asking questions.

Herman

I think seventy two hours is generous if you are just sitting in the same spot. If you move between terminals, use the inter terminal trains, and change your clothes frequently, you might get a week. But here is the thing, most airports now have loitering detection software. If the system sees a person who has been in the facility for more than twenty four hours without a corresponding flight record, it sends an alert to a mobile device of the nearest security officer.

Corn

So the clock is ticking from the moment you walk in. And if you try to sleep, that is the biggest giveaway. Sleeping in an airport is expected if there is a massive weather delay. If the boards are all red and thousands of people are on the floor, you can blend in. But on a clear day with no delays? You are a target.

Herman

Exactly. You would need to be a master of disguise. You would need to look like a high powered business traveler who just happens to be very early for a flight. But even then, the suit gets wrinkled. You start to get that airport sheen on your skin. People notice.

Corn

Let's do a thought experiment. Suppose we had to do it. Suppose it was a challenge. What would be our strategy? I think we would need to target a massive, multi terminal airport like Hartsfield Jackson in Atlanta or maybe Dubai International. Somewhere so large that the sheer volume of people provides a kind of camouflage.

Herman

Dubai would be a good choice because it is a twenty four hour hub. There is no downtime. There is always a flight arriving and a flight departing. You could theoretically rotate through the different concourses. Spend eight hours in Concourse A, take the train to Concourse B, wash up in a lounge if you can get access.

Corn

Oh, the lounges! That is the key. If you have a high level credit card or a frequent flyer status that gives you lounge access, you have showers, buffet food, and comfortable chairs. But even those have time limits. Most lounges only let you in four hours before your flight.

Herman

Right. They scan your boarding pass. So you would need a constant stream of refundable tickets. You buy a ticket, use the lounge, then cancel the ticket or change the date. But the airlines caught on to that years ago. They have systems to flag people who repeatedly book and cancel.

Corn

It sounds like the house always wins in this scenario. The airport is designed to be a flow system. It is like a pipe. It is meant to move people from point A to point B. If you try to stay in the pipe, you are an obstruction. The system is designed to flush you out.

Herman

That is a perfect analogy. The airport is a machine for movement. To live there is to try and exist in a state of permanent friction against that machine. It is exhausting, it is expensive, and in the age of AI surveillance, it is nearly impossible to do secretly.

Corn

And yet, people still do it. Not by choice, usually, but out of necessity. It makes me think about how we treat our public spaces. If the airport is the only place with air conditioning, clean water, and safety, it says a lot about the world outside the terminal doors.

Herman

It really does. For Nasser, the airport was safer than the alternative. It was a place where he was known, even if he was a prisoner of his own lack of paperwork. It became his village. He had his favorite merchants, his regular doctors, his friends among the cleaning staff.

Corn

I remember reading that he used to spend his days writing in his diary and reading books. He was very fastidious. He kept his area incredibly clean. He did not want to be seen as a vagrant; he wanted to be seen as a resident. There is a dignity in that.

Herman

There really is. He refused to be a victim of his circumstances. He created a life within the constraints he was given. But I do not think you or I, Corn, would find much dignity in it after about forty eight hours of eating overpriced prepackaged sandwiches and sleeping on a curved metal bench designed to prevent people from lying down.

Corn

Oh, those benches! The hostile architecture is real. Those armrests every twenty inches are specifically designed to make sure nobody can get a good night's sleep. It is a subtle way of saying, you are welcome here as a consumer, but not as a human who needs rest.

Herman

Exactly. Everything in a modern airport is designed to keep you moving toward a gate or toward a cash register.

Corn

You know, we should probably mention our own local context. Living in Jerusalem, we are pretty close to Ben Gurion Airport. It is one of the most secure airports in the world. I cannot imagine anyone lasting more than an hour there if they were trying to live in the terminal. The security profiling is so intense.

Herman

Oh, man. At Ben Gurion, they would know your life story before you even got to the check in desk. If you tried to hang out in the arrivals hall for a week, you would have a very long, very polite conversation with several security officers in a small room within the first few hours. They do not play around with loitering.

Corn

So, Daniel, if you are listening to this at home in our kitchen, the answer is probably no. We could not camp out in an airport indefinitely. We would be caught, we would be broke, and we would be incredibly sleep deprived.

Herman

But it is a fascinating window into how our world is managed. The airport is a microcosm of the modern state. It is all about borders, identity, and the monitoring of movement. When you try to live in that space, you are challenging the very idea of what a border is.

Corn

It is also a reminder of the importance of having a place to call home. As much as we complain about the traffic in Jerusalem or the quirks of our house, having a door you can lock and a bed that doesn't have an armrest in the middle of it is a luxury we often take for granted.

Herman

Absolutely. I will take our slightly messy living room over a sparkling clean terminal any day. Though I wouldn't mind having a duty free shop in the hallway. Imagine being able to buy giant Toblerones and expensive cologne on your way to the bathroom.

Corn

I think the novelty would wear off pretty fast, Herman. Especially when you realize you are paying fifteen dollars for a bag of cashews.

Herman

Fair point. Specificity is key! Speaking of which, did you know that the Charles de Gaulle Terminal One where Nasserli lived was designed with this very futuristic, circular aesthetic? It was meant to look like a spaceship. It is very fitting that a man who felt like an alien in his own world ended up living in a giant concrete flying saucer.

Corn

That is a great detail. It really adds to that feeling of isolation. Being in a circle, you are literally going nowhere. You are just orbiting the center of the terminal forever.

Herman

And the escalators there are inside these glass tubes that crisscross the central courtyard. You can see everyone moving, but you are separated from them by a layer of glass. It is a very visual representation of his entire experience. Being in the middle of everything but connected to nothing.

Corn

It is a powerful image. I think we have thoroughly explored the terminal man phenomenon. It is a mix of bureaucratic failure, human resilience, and the cold reality of modern security.

Herman

It definitely makes you look at your next layover a little differently. You are not just waiting for a flight; you are participating in a massive, high tech dance of movement and surveillance.

Corn

Well, if you have made it this far in the episode and you are not currently stuck in an airport, why not take a second to leave us a review? We really appreciate it when you guys take the time to rate the show on Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts. It helps other curious minds find us.

Herman

It really does. We love hearing from you, and it keeps us motivated to keep digging into these weird prompts that Daniel sends our way.

Corn

Exactly. You can find all our past episodes and a way to get in touch with us at our website, myweirdprompts.com. We have covered everything from flight tracking to the urban paradox, so there is plenty to catch up on.

Herman

This has been episode three hundred and twenty five of My Weird Prompts. I am Herman Poppleberry, and I am going to go appreciate my non metal bed now.

Corn

And I am Corn. Thanks for listening, everyone. We will be back next week with another deep dive into the strange and the obscure.

Herman

Until then, keep your passports safe and your layovers short!

Corn

See you next time.