

**Layover**  
by Tony Cox

If you spend time waiting for planes at a large airport, it's inevitable that you eventually see a familiar face. That's especially true if you're a college professor like me with plenty of former students. Sometimes, the chance meeting is memorable.

I do avian flu research in the southern provinces of China. The travel to my home in Tulsa involves a long layover at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, but I don't mind the delay. It provides me a chance to unwind after my hectic overseas trip.

My specialty is the study of viruses that have the ability to mutate and jump from animals to humans and then from humans to humans. Unfortunately, history provides us with many examples of animal viruses that devastate whole populations. Smallpox, anthrax, yellow fever, encephalitis, West Nile, Dengue fever, and, in my opinion, the Black Death of the Dark Ages are just the famous ones. There are many others, less virile, that cause milder maladies.

In the over-cooled airport lounge, I relax and plan my trip report about the sad plight of Chinese poultry farmers and their families who've contracted avian flu from their flocks. Every six months, I return to the villages to sample and document the mutations of the virus. Already, the bird flu virus has variants that can easily infect humans. Fortunately, there has been no case of a human infecting another human, but it will happen eventually. We hope to be ready when it does.

During a recent layover, my muse in the airport lounge was interrupted by an attractive young lady pleasantly dressed in a dark skirt and lavender blouse. Her brown hair was parted in the middle and hung below her shoulders.

She said, "You probably don't remember me, Professor Watkins, but I took one of your classes at the University of Oklahoma."

I looked closely at her and had not even a hint of recognition. My classes were small; someone like her should have been easy to remember. I motioned toward an empty chair and she sat down. "What class?" I asked.

"Your seminar on virus transference during animal-human interactions," she replied.

"Ah yes," I said. *That was at least three years ago.*

She looked at me and laughed. "You don't remember me, do you?"

I shook my head.

"I was going through a difficult period back then, and what I learned in your class helped me understand some things."

I remained silent, still trying to place her.

"When I saw you, Professor Watkins, I just had to come over and say hello." She smiled. "I didn't expect you to remember me. I wasn't one of your grad students. I was a biologist specializing in amphibians. I'd already graduated and spent several years in Kenya studying the *hyperolius viridiflavus*."

"The infamous Common Reed Frog."

"Yes, that's the one. In grad school, I'd studied the ability of adult female Reed frogs to switch gender and successfully mate. After graduation, I received a grant to observe gender switching in the wild. At the time, Kenya was

a good place to do that." The woman paused, then continued, "I was successful. I even documented a rare male to female change."

I nodded. "There's still quite a lot of speculation about what actually causes the gender change. Some say it's triggered by a chemical imbalance brought on by the stress of a decrease in the male-female ratio."

She frowned. "That's what some say."

I raised my hand, palm out. "Wait--I remember a post-doc in one of my classes--he was convinced the mechanism for the sex change was a virus, not just any virus, but one that could mutate toward human transference."

She was silent while I leaned forward and continued my recall.

"His name was -- Frank--Frank Givens."

The woman absentmindedly tucked an errant lock of brown hair behind her ear and smiled. "Actually, I go by Frankie now."