Commentary: TSA, I think we have a problem

Travelers stand in security lines to be screened by TSA personnel May 16, 2016, at Midway Airport in Chicago. (Jose M. Osorio / Chicago Tribune)

By **Joanne Cleaver**

MAY 16, 2016, 4:26 PM

Wave! Oh, there you are. I can see you, right there at the hostess desk of Harry Caray's.

Yes, I'm in the security line. I told you I'd get here early. I'm back here by the escalators.

The escalators that take you down to baggage check.

No, I'm not calling from the cab.

There, did you get that selfie? I'm really here.

You're lucky that your connecting flight keeps you behind the security lines. Hold a table? I'm not sure they'll let you for that long. Sure, get a seat at the bar. We've got two hours before we board! Plenty of time.

It's not?

You waited for three hours in Charlotte?

I do have TSA PreCheck! But it doesn't always work. It's actually random as to whether or not it applies to any particular flight.

It used to be reliable. I paid my $85 for PreCheck two whole years ago and it worked like a charm until December. Suddenly, it evaporated from my Southwest boarding passes. Then it was there the next time. And gone the next time.

Oh, I bring along my official letter with all my identifying numbers proving I'm a tourist, not a terrorist. Doesn't do much good. If your PreCheck status isn't on your boarding pass, it's like you don't have PreCheck.

Hold on — shuffling, shuffling.

Oops, almost dropped you there.

How many drinks have you had? No, go ahead and get lunch, I can make it to Los Angeles on peanuts. If I get on board. Ha, ha! Of course I will. I don't think I'm going to be able to join you for lunch. I'll pick up an apple.

So as I said, PreCheck was working great till it wasn't. So I asked a Southwest gate agent about it, and she told me that PreCheck is no guarantee. Says so right at the Transportation Security Administration website, I looked it up myself. Here, let me read it to you: TSA incorporates unpredictable security measures throughout the airport and no passenger is guaranteed expedited screening.

That explains Grand Rapids. Their PreCheck doesn't open until all the morning flights are gone.

I know Grand Rapids has only 15 gates.

Well, it's not so cute when you have to wait 20 minutes surrounded by do-gooder school groups who've never flown before and grandmas trying to get pies through the scanner and all you want to do is get through with your shoes on and get some coffee on the other side.

Hold on — sorry, sir, sorry, right, yes, good afternoon, here's my license and my boarding pass. OK, thanks.

I can see you better now. Oh, look! You're perfectly framed by the scanners on each side and the TSA monitor overhead. It's telling me that "TSA Pre keeps you moving forward with confidence and peace of mind." Tell that to the people at the airlines who don't bother to be part of this grand plan to make us wait slightly less long as it takes to potty train a toddler.

Oh, a whole bunch don't bother. Frontier, and little regionals, such as North Country Sky, which goes to Michigan. A lot of the international carriers don't. So remember that the next time the airlines start throwing stale pretzels at the feds.

Not that things are smooth even when PreCheck does work as promised. Remember that time at LaGuardia when someone started walking off with my messenger bag and iPad, while I was still in the body scanner? And I started yelling, and the TSA agent said 'How far can they get? We're in an airport.'

I thought TSA was going to take me down right there. International incident! I actually believed the PreCheck promise, the one that's scrolling on the screen over my head right now: "Your laptop stays right in its case. Efficient, smart and secure."

Where are you going? Time to board? What? Wait! Wait for me!

No, sir, I'm not trying to cause trouble.

Calm down? This is calm. The kind of calm that's a four-letter word.

Hello, customer service? I think I need to rebook my flight.

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