

Turbulence

I figured I would be retired by now; instead I spend my working hours at 30,000 plus feet, pushing a metal cart up and down the narrow aisle of an Airbus 319 or 320. Retirement is as far away as the stars outside the windows on night flights, the sun on early morning trips like this one out of Chicago O'Hare. Rays angle their way in and wash over seats D, E and F in the economy class rows as we climb. Radiant, almost enough to make me believe in some higher spirit. I sit in the fold-down seat at the back of the aircraft and watch the spears of light waver along the floor. Adele sits across from me. She fans herself with the in-case-of-emergency card. Droplets of perspiration shimmer on her forehead and temples. A hot flash. We've been flying together off and on for thirty years. She looks tired. Frayed. She won't be retiring anytime soon either.

Passengers in the right side window seats pull shades down as the aircraft makes a wide turn and heads west to Phoenix. I get a little claustrophobic in this metal tube for hour upon hour. It helps if I can see outside for a while, but they deprive me of this.

Adele and I unbuckle our belts and begin preparation for the beverage and snack service. I finish my cart first and wait for her. She starts in the front economy class rows. Cameron works first class. It's not as busy up there, but passengers are more demanding. Like whining,

needy kids. I handle the last fifteen rows, start at 18 and work my way down. The smile ache sets in quickly, begins around my mouth, shoots upward to my cheeks and then to my eyes. It feels as if clothespins pinch my face to hold the expression in place.

I notice 21B and C as soon as I start my section. He has a shock of white hair that looks like a cluster of cotton balls, hers is silky black and parted in the middle. Drapes over her breasts like a spill of lava down the side of a mountain. Flawless olive skin. She sits in the window seat, he in the middle. The aisle seat is empty. He reminds me of someone I once knew, a ghost grown old. After a while faces look familiar. As if there's only so many different molds and they keep getting reused.

Passengers who make the sign of the cross at take-off annoy the shit out of me, always have. Like 16A with a black pug dog in the carrier that won't fit completely under the seat. I don't know how we missed that before take-off. It's one of those soft carriers with a zipper on the top. He holds it on his lap, unzipped and the dog's upper body pokes out. It's sleeping peacefully. The man's eyes are closed, his right hand rests gently on the animal's little shoulder. Adele pushes her cart to row 16 and notices the dog. I can hear her over the buzz of passenger conversation. I watch for a couple of minutes.

“You need to put him back in the carrier, Sir.”

The man is startled awake and looks at her. “He's not hurting anything.”

16B looks from Adele to the man with the dog. 16C has his laptop open and stares intently at the screen. One time I purposely spilt a glass of wine on a passenger's laptop. One of the premium reds, Reliz Creek Pinot Noir 2011. It looked like blood spreading over the keyboard. Of course, I apologized all over the place and told him the airline would cover it which they did, but the computer was ruined for the flight and he couldn't continue with

whatever bullshit business he was working on. A bunch of bar charts with numbers was the last thing I saw on his screen.

“It’s airline regulations.” Adele’s silver clip slips from her hair and her thick brown-gray bangs fall over one eye. She shakes her head to get the strand of hair off her face and looks around on the floor and in the food cart. She finds it wedged between a packet of Nabisco Cheese Nips and a bag of low calorie pretzels. She sticks the clip back in, a little too high and that makes her look odd.

The man grumbles, pushes the pug’s head into the carrier and zips it closed.

Adele’s right about the regulations on pets, but the pug is cute. Its bulging black eyes had opened and it looked at the guy full of love and loyalty. That’s something. I kind of liked seeing it even though the guy himself looked like a loser. Faded green sweatshirt, greasy blond hair pushed behind his ears. Another day, another passenger and Adele might have let it slide. But this day, this passenger, this dog. Sometimes I worry about her. I think of that Jet Blue flight attendant. The guy totally lost it, opened the emergency chute and slid down the inflated side as the plane sat on the tarmac waiting for a gate.

18D’s a modern day Paul Bunyan. He looks as if he’s getting ready to chop down a tree with an ax, a modern day Paul Bunyan. Jesus. He gets up from his seat, his shoulders and head bent forward to avoid hitting his head. He towers, forms a shadow like a vulture swooping in as he goes up and down the aisle, running his hands along the overhead bins for support. Stretching his legs. He’s not doing anything wrong, but I want to tell him to sit his big cloddy body back in his seat.

And a kid, up in Row 10, the bulkhead row. Probably just a couple of months old. It’s Adele’s row but you can hear it all over the aircraft. Squealing its head off; the mom bounces

him up and down on her shoulder. He isn't even cute. Bald with a scrunched up little face like an old man. Wrinkles across the forehead. I've actually never seen such an ugly baby. I feel like putting a wet cloth over its face.

Usually it's just a few passengers that get to me. Sometimes simply because of their presence on my flight. As if they're the reason I'm not yet retired and probably won't be for the foreseeable future. Sometimes it's more than that. I play a little game on every flight, choose the worst passenger. Not a random selection, I think it through.

21B with the white hair is much older than the woman next to him. She's a young girl really, eighteen or nineteen. At first I thought he might be her father. Or grandfather. He's got to be seventy at least. But they seem like a couple. The way his hand rests on her knee. He speaks to her in a language I don't recognize. Not French or Spanish. I don't think she understands English. Maybe she's one of those mail-order brides. Hoping to get a green card. They could be married already.

We're almost through Kansas, approaching the northwest corner of New Mexico. 19F is taking photos of the vast emptiness below us. She has short reddish-brown hair, almost a crew cut. It matches the hair of the man next to her except his is a mix of pale blond and gray. They look almost identical; the way people sometimes resemble their pets. They ordered two Irish Crèmes and toasted one another. Maybe they're newlyweds, but they're in their fifties at least. Maybe it's their anniversary. They look as if they're from someplace like Minnesota. Outdoorsy people with expensive socks and Birkenstock sandals. The kind of people who would take pictures of barren spaces. Find something meaningful in the nothingness of a place like Kansas.

The black pug is out of its carrier again. Adele is livid. She's just pushed her snack cart to the back of the plane getting it ready for meal orders. When she sees him she walks rapidly back to 16A.

"I told you to keep that damn dog in the carrier."

16C stops staring at his laptop screen and looks first at Adele and then at the pug. The barrette is still too tight and high in her hair; she looks sort of crazed. Other passengers turn their heads to see what's going on. I'm tempted to intervene, but the guy puts the dog back in the carrier and Adele walks away.

She might be even younger than eighteen or nineteen, the woman in 21C. She wears a white silky blouse, long-sleeved with wide cuffs and two pearly-looking buttons at each wrist. She looks a little professional in a pretend sort of way. Except the dark gray skirt is so short it's nearly to the top of her thighs. The way he gazes at her gives it away, a lusty look I've seen before, tinged with ambiguity.

Tenth grade math. The girl is sixteen. Mr. Jamison is thirty-nine. The girl feels weird calling him Mr. Jamison the way other students do, but Ricky, which is what he tells her to call him when they're alone, is awkward too.

She's plain looking at first glance. You see the mousy brown hair, small breasts not even fully developed yet. A late bloomer. But, there's something pretty in the face when you see her up close. Maybe it's the eyes, an intense shade of green with striations of brown radiating from the pupil. An off-center smile.

Back then, I watched her as if viewing a character in a film.

"You're the smartest student I've had in all the years I've been teaching," Mr. Jamison/Ricky says to her the afternoon he asks her to stay after class a few minutes.

The compliment makes the girl smile. And blush. It's the kind of compliment she doesn't think of as bullshit and she likes that he notices her intelligence. He also tells her she is pretty.

Adele is sitting on her pull-out seat flipping through a Time magazine. I worry about her. Passengers get to all of us but sometimes Adele seems especially vulnerable lately. Anxious. Uptight. She lets it get under her skin. When we have a few days' layover in Phoenix she drives up to Sedona to a divine energy healer. Comes back all calm and glowing, tells me about her soul-retrieval session. "You should try it," she says. Tells me I have something called heart incoherence. "Your energy centers are off," she says. "Beating at different rates." I don't really know what she's talking about but she's so full of joy I just listen. It only takes one flight though for all her luminescence to fade and her own energy centers to get fucked up again.

16A's taken off his sweatshirt and the yellow t-shirt underneath looks smelly and slept-in. The sweatshirt lays over the pug which is on his lap, completely out of its carrier. I can see its squiggly little tail sticking out. Adele hasn't noticed. Three passenger call buttons light up at the same time. The couple in the Birkenstocks order coffee. 18D wants water. 21B presses his call light. He wants a Coke; the mail order bride will have a Sprite. I get the coffee and water first.

Mr. Jamison/Ricky wants to show things to the girl, things unrelated to tenth grade math. Cool places. New York, Chicago, other big cities. Life. There's so much out there he tells her. He wants to take her the hell out of Maricopa, Arizona. That appeals to her. They're lying on a queen bed in the Desert Breeze motel.

"Don't worry about the blood," he says. "It's normal the first time."

They haven't had real sex before. He'd touch her, put his mouth on her, ask her to touch him. He taught her some stuff, not everything. She isn't stupid or completely naïve. Of course, she knows about the blood. In some strange way she knew all along this would happen.

“What’s age anyway,” he says. “It’s what’s in your mind and your heart that matters.”

The girl thinks that sounds deep, something of substance. He gets up from the bed, runs a washcloth under warm water and wipes the blood from her. Then, he kisses her forehead.

I feel some turbulence begin. I can always predict it, even clear air turbulence when the pilot has no warning and the sky is a calm blue. The quivering starts in my stomach a few seconds before the plane vibrates. Adele says she’d rather not know. I don’t have a choice though, I know when it’s coming and I’m used to that.

We’re almost to Arizona. Phoenix is my base. But I won’t be going home because I have a three-hour layover before heading back to Chicago. Tonight it’s the Holiday Inn near O’Hare.

I like approaching Phoenix in the daytime, the raw jaggedness of the mountains. The way they jut from the earth like truths that won’t go away. Sure the sweep of lights across the valley at night is beautiful but the brown, dust colored starkness feels closer to me, a reminder of what underlies everything modern and civilized when you brush away the polish and glitter.

Most of their secret times together take place at the Desert Breeze. The woman at the desk doesn’t ask questions. The girl always waits in the car. An old car, a Ford something with no radio or cassette player. She doesn’t think to ask about details of all the places he is going to take her.

Once she notices a photo of a young girl in his wallet. They’re in Denny’s and he pulls a credit card from his wallet to pay.

“Who is that?” the girl asks.

“My daughter,” he snaps the wallet closed and puts it back in his pocket.

“What’s her name?”

“Jessie.”

The girl has never seen him so uncomfortable. She noticed in those few seconds when his wallet was open that Jessie looked about her own age.

I've grown accustomed to hotel rooms. They're all basically the same layout, king or two-queen bed set up, bathroom with a noisy vent fan that spins whenever the light switch is on. Spotless sink and vanity. Big flat screen TV. Sometimes I think if I forgot something in a hotel room in one city I'd find it in a hotel room in the next city, in the exact spot where I left it. I know this is absurd to think some object left in a Holiday Inn in Chicago might show up at a Marriot in Minneapolis. Adele says it's sad. But that's how I often feel. They're all alike. That's the comfort.

It's not even a contest for the worst passenger, the one who gets the piss water. Paul Bunyan is just a big old clunky idiot. Probably harmless. 16A is snoring and Adele still hasn't noticed the dog. Or maybe she's given up, remembering to retrieve her soul. 21B is a disgusting man. Probably has to take Viagra. Maybe they don't even have sex, he could just put his hands all over her. Probably thinks he rescued her from the Philippines or Thailand or wherever she's from. Maybe she thinks that too. Maybe it's true. But that doesn't change anything.

I've thought of telling Adele about the piss water. Offer it to her for her worst passenger. But some things are best kept to yourself. I have one for every flight, a two-ounce plastic bottle I bought at REI. Full of piss. I keep it in my apron pocket. The logistics don't always work out but I try to give it to the worst passenger on each flight. They have to order something besides water so they don't notice the discoloration.

Where he finally takes her is Las Vegas. For a weekend. Buys her a short black dress and high heel sandals. "You'll look older," he says. "But nobody in Vegas cares." Still he goes

to the trouble to get her a fake ID. "Just in case" he says. She has to show it at the bar in the Stardust hotel.

The girl senses some essential impossibility to things when she's with him and when he drops her off at her house early Sunday afternoon her mother is not at work at the Veteran's Hospital as she is supposed to be. Mr. Jamison doesn't show up for class on Monday. Disappears. Sends her two postcards. One from Albuquerque and one from Oklahoma City. They don't look anything like she imagined New York and Chicago or any big city. He will haunt all her future relations. She'll imagine the hands belong to him. Even after so many years pass and she knows he would be an old man. Maybe dead.

Don't get me wrong. It's not all bad this life in the sky. In a way it's my anchor. That eternal blue I feel I could reach out and hold on to. When I got my first car I fell in love with the interstate. It was an old Mercury station wagon. Huge inside. A person could practically live in it. I always had a change of clothes and toothpaste and deodorant. I liked having enough with me that I could just take off if I wanted, disappear down the highway until I got good and out of town. I'd check into a cheap motel near one of the exits. Just me and the strangers in other rooms. I felt some comfort knowing they were there. Some peace in the sound of tires swooshing on the asphalt.

The sky's my interstate now. And airports and freeways in and out of stopover cities. Because eventually of course, you stop for a while. You go through stuff with all those strangers on the planes, even if you can't stand them. When you finally arrive, they feel sort of like annoying family members. Even the ones who bug you so much you pour piss water in their drinks. You've survived together. The waits, the delayed flights, the turbulence, the cramped space, the bad weather. These things glue you together in an odd way.

We'll begin our initial descent into Phoenix soon. I touch my pocket; feel the REI bottle and head back to the galley for a Coke and Sprite for 21B and C.

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