Airport Novel

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I think the man sitting next to me is dead. He fell asleep while we were taxiing in Miami. Take-off was rough, but it didn't wake him. Since then, I've been watching for a breath, a twitch. Nothing. His chin is resting on his chest. His mouth is closed. He's very old, of course. He has lots of white hair and scabs all over his face. His sweater is covered in a fine white powder, and I realize that he's the source of this material, his skinflakes and dandruff. It's like he's turning into dust right in front of me.

The awkward thing is that I've had to pee for a while now. This makes the situation considerably more complex. The deader the man, the more urgent the pee. I try to be bold. I tap him gently on the shoulder.

Sir, I say. He doesn't budge. I turn to the woman sitting by the window, but she's no help. She's a rather old person herself, entirely occupied by two frozen water bottles stuffed upside-down in the seatback pocket. Every few minutes she checks to see how much ice has melted and drinks up the new trickle of water.

I sit back and look straight ahead. The burning sensation in my bladder has started to flush through my body into my face and the tips of my fingers. I should try to distract myself. I should watch a movie and forget about this old man, let someone else deal with him. Surely someone will notice him and do something. Maybe the flight attendant coming around with the trash bag, or the man following his toddler up the aisle to the bathroom. But they walk right by without even a glance. Can't they see that this man is clearly dead, that I'm sitting here boiling with discomfort? I'm all alone with this catastrophe.

Bad things will happen if this man turns out to be dead. For starters, I won't be able to get up and use the bathroom. Imagine the looks I'd get crawling over the corpse! No, I'll have to stay right here for the rest of the flight. I don't think I could actually wet myself. I have too much

shame for that. But I feel that my bladder could explode inside of me, and the resulting piss-hemorrhage would probably be fatal. But even if I survive this, when they find out he's dead they'll have to ground the plane, and then they'll have questions for me. There will be police officers, and they'll say, Sir, we need you to come down to the station to give a statement. What will I do, what will I say then? I can't begin to imagine.

There's a strange feeling that creeps into you when traveling with a dead man. The longer death remains unacknowledged, the more comfortable it becomes. It loses some of its terror and becomes if not friendly then familiar. It starts to seem natural that others sit next to this person or that person while death sits next to me. We have nothing to say to each other, death and I, nothing that needs to be said. It's all understood, or rather nothing is understood, and in the growing silence I start to forget which of us is supposed to be alive and which is supposed to be dead, which of us is having these thoughts and which is sitting in thoughtless death. It's the blurring of this boundary that wakes me up to the fear of life, and I cling to it, a tether to pull me out of death into bright, frightful life.

Sir, I say. Sir?

The dead man's mouth is parted like the opening of a tomb, receiving only the air that blows in from the vent overhead. I give him a hard nudge. He's cold, rigor-morits-stiff. I keep nudging and shaking and tapping, almost hitting him. People across the aisle start to stare. Sir! I say. Sir!

There's a dim stirring as of a stone giant. The man comes back to life. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't move. The only indication that he's now alive and awake is a thin slit in his burl-like eyelids. I should be relieved, but my original fear of this man, dead, has been replaced with a new fear of him, living. The pain in my bladder throbs, and I try to make my escape.

Sorry to wake you, I just need to– I stop here, pointing toward the rear of the plane.

The man sucks air through his teeth and thinks for a moment. Then he nods, as though he sees the sense in this. Slowly, he unbuckles and gets out of his seat. I hurry to the bathroom. It surprises me how long it takes to get a good stream going and how quickly it's all over. Maybe it wasn't quite as urgent as I thought.

I come back to our row and the man gets up to let me in. He gives me a look that could be a smile, though the features of his face are so distorted with age that it's hard to say for sure.

You thought I was dead, he says.

What? I say. No I didn't.

Yep, he says. You did. Graveyard dead. Dead as a doorknocker. Ha! You should meet my daughter, she'll pounce on me the second I close my eyes, all shaking me and crying, Daddy! Daddy! Come back to me, Daddy! Quit it! I say. Can't a man blink in his own home?

I'm sorry, I say. I just wanted to make sure you're all right.

I'm all right, he says. I was better than all right before you went and woke me up. I was having the most delicious sleep, you can't imagine. You're still a young guy, so you don't know this yet, but when you get to be about fifty you pretty much stop sleeping. You just lay down at night and worry. You worry yourself out of bed, then you worry around the house and worry about the pipes and the floors and the windows until the sun comes up. And you think, Boy howdy! How can I get by without a wink of sleep? But you do, all through your fifties and sixties and seventies. Then something changes when you get to be as old as me. Sleep gets hungry for you again. You get in bed, and the blankets just gobble you up. You close your eyes Monday night, open them up Friday morning. And you don't dream. You just float. It feels like eternity. You wake up, and you can't remember who you are.

The man smacks his lips, savoring the flavor of sleep. Long nose hairs wiggle back and forth, reaching, searching. He gives me a poke with a bony elbow.

I know what you're thinking, he says. Get it while you got it, old timer! You should be up looking at things and smelling things, not sleeping your life away! But that's the thing, I love sleep more than anything in the world. More than pretty girls and chocolate cake and the Grand Canyon. It doesn't matter how many great grandbabies you put in my lap. I'll still be thinking about that next sleep. When's that next sleep coming?

He's speaking very softly now, almost whispering. His eyes are glossy like sucked-on peppermints.

The thing is, he says, most of the time I think I'm not really here. I'm already gone. He holds his hand out in front of his face as if to show it's become translucent. See what I mean? he says. Some people are ghosts without being quite dead. I'm one of them, and you're one of them, and she's one of them. All of us on this plane.

With this, he lets his head fall back against the seat and shuts his eyes. After a few shallow breaths he becomes completely still. I watch him as he fades away into this perfect stillness, becoming dull and distant. I find myself half-hoping that he'll shoot up and try to scare me, and he'll suddenly seem much younger and more vibrant. You should see the look on your face, he'll say, and I'll concede a nervous laugh. I'm just joking, he'll say. I like to joke around, I can't help it. He'll give me the smile that old people are supposed to give you that says it's okay and you don't have to worry about anything. But instead, he keeps sleeping. I have to admit, he makes it look good. He makes it look like a person is made for nothing but sleeping.

I turn on my seatback screen and look at the flight map. Not long now until we land in Denver. The little airplane icon passes over the green-brown fields of Kansas, towns with names

like Plainville and Portis and Paradise. I try to imagine the houses down there, and what they're doing inside while we fly over unnoticed, but all I see are rooms with no one in them, no furniture, and no pictures on the walls.

It's a short layover in Denver then on to Seattle. I fall asleep on the flight without realizing. I dream that I'm giving an animal a bath, and my pants are splashed with soapy water. For a few seconds after I wake up, I think the dream is a movie I've been watching. I stare at the black seatback screen, baffled. Then I realize I've been sleeping, and I shake all over.

While walking around the terminal, I find the old woman with the frozen water bottles looking at the flight information display. I like it when someone I've traveled with turns up later in the day. It feels like running into an old friend. And when you happen to be on two flights in a row with someone, then you feel you've really been through something together.

She's on the phone. When it's her turn to speak she tugs nervously on her elbow skin. No, no, no, she says, shaking her head as though the other person can see her. That won't work, I already explained this to the other girl, the *computer* changed my flight because I was going to miss my connection. I didn't buy a ticket for the 6:40 flight, I *can't be* on the 6:40 flight. The computer *automatically* switched my flight.

Her mouth hangs open as though she just can't believe what the other person is saying, as though the world is full of morons whose only ambition is to make her miserable.

There's really nothing you can do? she says. I just want my ticket back, the ticket that I *paid* for. Yes, I'll hold.

She turns to me, and for a moment I'm afraid she'll recognize me and be embarrassed, but it seems she doesn't remember my face, or perhaps she's just blinded in her distress. I can't believe this is happening to me, she says. She's looking right at me, but she's not talking to me, doesn't seem to see me. Her face has turned completely red except for a few splotches of sickly white under her eyes. Every breath she pulls through her old lips makes her shake with rage. She looks like she might scream or throw up or just tip over and die.

Are you kidding me? she says. This is ridiculous. I want a refund. I want a *full* refund. She falls apart completely now, her mind broken. Tears leak onto her cheeks and disperse through crisscrossing lines of agony. She sobs, demanding her full refund. I want a *full* refund, she says, I want a *full* refund, emphasizing *full* each time with the same inflection, holding that *full* out in front of her like a candle in the dark.

I don't understand how she hasn't noticed me. My presence feels like such an intrusion, yet she doesn't even seem to know I'm here. I keep thinking that someone will see her or see me seeing her. One of the travelers walking through the terminal will recognize this as a crime of watching and put a stop to it. But I'm invisible. Am I really here? I feel like I could float up into the air above her and observe this scene from any direction. I could become tiny and pass through the phone into the office where the airline representative sits and listens to this woman crying somewhere far away.

So it surprises me when I try to drift a little closer and find my legs moving to catch me. All my weight suddenly presses down into my feet. Here I am. I feel now how the muscles in my shoulders and back stiffen when the woman's attention snaps onto me. Well can I at least get a rental car? she says. Is she asking me? She stares with furious desperation, her free hand waving around as though signaling for help. I don't know what's expected of me in this situation, so I just stand here stupidly with sweat dripping down my sides.

At last, she hangs up the phone. Can you believe these people? she roars. Thugs, that's what they are. They have no shame.

I express my sympathies as best as I can and try to withdraw, but the old woman walks after me, blowing her nose and dabbing at the tears on her face. She follows me through the terminal, telling me about the time she got stuck in Chicago O'Hare for half-a-day, and about her

daughter's flight to Italy that was canceled hours before it was supposed to depart. I tune in and out as she catalogues dozens of other grievances that drift further and further from the point of departure. There are mechanics and post office clerks, cable providers, traffic cops, HVAC technicians, and all of them thugs, degenerates.

I paid a forty-dollar deductible in the office, she says, so imagine my surprise when a bill for two hundred dollars shows up in the mail a few weeks later. I asked them, What is this for? and they said, That's your deductible for your CT scan, and I said, I already paid my deductible for the CT scan, and they said, No, that was the deductible for the appointment, there's an additional deductible for the scan, and I said, But my appointment was for the CT scan!

I catch her before I realize she's falling. I suppose I don't catch her so much as she collapses into me, and I somehow manage to not fall over. She's given me her full weight, and I try to keep us both upright without touching her too much. Her head is resting on my chest. She looks up at me, lips parted. Her pupils seem to swallow up her eyes, as though all the light's gone out of the terminal. This is really happening, and I know it is because the other travelers have seen us now. They stand around staring with their arms held out pointlessly. None dare to approach except a young man who says he's a nurse-in-training. The two of us help the woman over to a bench between a lactation pod and a vending machine.

What's your name, ma'am? the young man says. He's kneeling on the ground in front of her, his lips just a few inches from her face. The power of his voice makes her blink. She's smiling, awestruck, head rolling back, staring up at a shimmering credit card advertisement.

Julie O'Brien, she says with a chuckle, like she just came up with the name on the spot.

How are you feeling, Julie? the man says. He keeps her steady with a hand on her arm.

Fine, she says. A little dizzy.

I can see that, he says. He takes off his jacket and drapes it over her front. Now to me, he says, Stay with her. Keep her warm. I'm going to get a medic.

It's just Julie and I now plus a few gawkers standing disrespectfully close but too far to be of any help. I sit down on the bench next to Julie. She drops her head on my shoulder.

I'm sorry about all this fuss, she says.

It's quite alright, I say.

I get these dizzy spells now and then, she says. This cosmic vertigo pours into me all of a sudden. It feels like I've been shot with a truth-beam from a truth-laser from an alien spaceship a million lightyears away, and the truth is so big and dark that I can't think it all at once. I don't know what exactly it is I've been zapped with, I can't quite wrap my head around it. But it feels a little like when I was a girl, when, in a flash, I would remember what it was like before I was born, and the memory, or the memory of the feeling of a remembering like that, makes all of *this* seem so confusing that my legs just go, and then I start to fall through endless space.

She turns sad again, and this time it's a sadness untouched by rage. She sinks into me like a weepy toddler, tears bubbling out of her eyes and mouth.

But part of it, she says, part of the truth is, is that they can't do this to us! They can't treat us this way! That much I know. They can't do this to us.

One of the onlookers has the idea to buy Julie a water from the vending machine. He fumbles for a while with the input and the payment, then sheepishly presents the bottle to her like a student giving flowers to a favorite teacher. The sight makes Julie brighten up instantly.

Oh, thank you, she says, but I already have some. She opens her purse and pulls out the two still-frozen water bottles. Look at this! she says. Look, look! I took these from my

daughter's freezer in Miami ten hours ago. I thought they'd be completely melted by now but just look at how much ice is left! So much ice!

Wearing the nurse-in-training's jacket like a bib, Julie holds out the frozen bottles for all to see. The onlookers move in closer, coming together, becoming a group. There's a lot of whispering and frowning and headshaking, disbelief. All that ice. Julie is beaming with pride when the medic arrives to ultimately decide that nothing whatsoever is wrong with her.

I'm in the mood for a book. It seems that the thing to do would be to buy a really long book, to find the most comfortable chair in the airport, and do nothing but sit and read and eat sandwiches until the book is finished. I'd like to read a story where everyone is incredibly rich. The characters should constantly be visiting each other's houses and making plans they never see through. There should be many long descriptions of the furniture and the lights and the entryways and the bookcases in the libraries with the ladders that slide up and down on rails. They should feel tired all the time, and they should talk endlessly about someone who never shows up. Once, just once, they should go on a short trip to the mountains or the seaside which seems tiresome in the moment but throbs in memory afterwards with a beguiling significance.

The problem is that a book is much better before you've read it. As I wander around the airport bookstore, I spend a long time studying the covers with their blocky titles and cartoonish faces turned cooly away. I feel I've already read *An Acceptable Woman* and *Unless All the Tomorrows* and *The Arborist's Niece,* which seem to exist fully formed in my mind like colors or copper bells. I can sense the sweeping adventure that waits behind the cover of *And So We Go Down* with its shadowy little boat sailing into the drooping jungle. But will the feeling still be there after the book is finished, after the enormous gulf of possibilities has been furrowed down to one hard, immutable end? Driven half-insane with indecision, I choose a small book called *Bits* that seems to promise nothing with its feeble title and plain brown cover. I buy it without reading the blurb on the back, along with a candy bar and a bag of peanuts.

I go to the central terminal and sit down. Above me towers an enormous three-story window dividing the sky into a hundred panels of light. On the tarmac, the snub-nosed tug trucks wheel around between the planes like insects. There are many grease-smeared machines sitting around in a jumble, each with its own mysterious purpose known only to the silent, serious

people on the other side of the glass. In the food court, a big family has pushed together many tables and piled them with suitcases, backpacks, shopping bags, and discarded articles of clothing, creating a stronghold that takes up the space of a small living room. There are at least two sets of parents, a grandmother and grandfather, and many children, all of them boys, who are fighting for control of a single portable gaming system.

I screw up my focus and open my book. It begins like this:

One by one, all the pictures in the house came unstuck from the wall. Sometimes the family heard them fall and sometimes they didn't, but invariably they were there in the morning, pictures slumped against the baseboard like tired children that can sleep anywhere. When Trixie and Maria Dolores got out of bed on Sunday, they found Mother bent over in the hall, headless and white in her threadbare nightgown. The sisters waited in the doorway, barely breathing as they listened to the soft click, click, click *of Mother picking glass out of the carpet. To them, it seemed that an age passed in that hall. Surely, they were women themselves now, hunched with sorrows and the trouble of children. They were old too, they thought, older than Mother even. It was all over now, the work and the whole awful mess. At last, Mother stood up, creaking like a tree. She turned to the girls and held out the picture with the glass shards piled on the black-and-white face. "Great-aunt Priscilla," she said, and that was all.*

As I read, I can't help letting my attention drift back to the family sprawled out next to me. Their numbers seem to increase by the minute. Two more boys return from the restroom hand in hand and flop down on their faces as though shot dead. What I thought was just a bundle of jackets on the floor suddenly stirs, revealing a boy buried underneath, shirtless, flushed, eyes crusty. He totters around sleepily until he comes to perch like a bird on the arm of his brother's chair. He watches the older boy play his game. He makes small comments and

recommendations, pointing with a sticky finger at something on the screen. Now the older brother has had enough of this. He drops the game in his lap and gives his brother a terrific shove. The little boy topples to the ground, unhurt but crying inconsolably. After a minute of wailing, the boy's grandpa picks him up and carries him to his chair. He rocks him back and forth in his lap, petting his hair and blowing on his tear-streaked face. In a deep, soothing voice, he says, You know, you're bothering a lot of people. Did you know that? You're making a lot of people really sad.

Watching this, my body suddenly remembers Julie O'Brien. I touch the spot on my chest where her head went. It feels warmer than the rest of me. At the time, I was barely aware of the contact. I was too scared to notice. But now I feel her all over. I can even smell her dry, grandmotherly hair. It's strange. In the airport, I'm surrounded by people, but physical contact is rare aside from the odd backhanded pat down. I do long to be touched sometimes, I don't think it's so wrong. When I'm very tired, I feel myself pulling toward the other travelers as if by magnetic force, and it's all I can do to keep myself from throwing my arms around a stranger on the jet bridge. It gets to the point where I'll sit on the aisle just to feel the other passengers jostling me on their way to the bathroom. It's not a sex thing, I don't think it is, and I don't derive pleasure from it really. It's just good to know that a person can't float straight through me.

At another table, a young man sits alone with a sketchpad. His back is turned to me. On the page in front of him there's a pencil drawing of the terminal. All of us on the ground, the chairs, trash cans, charging tables, the little shops that form a protective ring around us, he's done these rather quickly, depicted in a vague streak of activity. But the high windows, the pillars, the crossbeams that swoop overhead, these have been sketched with reverent precision. He's a talented artist. Every stroke of his pencil seems to add more space to the page. The

terminal in his picture is somehow brighter and sharper than the real one, it's conclusions more apparent. Nowhere is there anything that can be recognized as a wall, nothing that closes in, only that which opens up to light or a view or some new direction. It's a room without an easily definable shape, without a clear end or beginning, whose borders can be defined as narrowly or as widely as the individual's attention.

The young man turns his face up toward the ceiling, gazing appreciatively like a visitor in the Sistine Chapel. I follow his eyes, feeling dizzied by all the clean white panels and poles. There are birds up there, I hadn't noticed, just plain brown sparrows. I can hear them chirping above the roar of conversation and intercom announcements. The young man notices my interest, and he gives me a sly smile. He returns briefly to his pad, making a few jabs with his pencil. Then he turns around to show me the new addition.

Birds, he says, as though I could mistake them for anything else.

The young man invites me to join him at his table. He introduces himself as Emilio, architect. His face has an academic softness to it with childlike skin and brown eyes sparkling behind his glasses. He speaks with an affected shyness, the calculated stammering and lip-biting doing nothing to undermine his obvious self-assurance. We flip through his sketchbook together. On each page is a drawing of a different airport. Emilio names each one and makes occasional comments. Marrakesh, Cairo, Kansas City, love these Y-columns here, Manchester, Lisbon, Bangkok, can't beat this lamella roof, Santiago, Munich, heavenly lighting. He seems eager for me to approve, as though he personally designed each one of them, and not for the purpose of transportation but just to be looked at and admired. I ooh and ah as much as feels appropriate.

Emilio is only a student, but he tells me he hopes to design airports someday. I like houses as much as the next guy, he says. Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't turn up my nose at a

museum contract either. But for me the airport is the ultimate architectural project. The problems and opportunities it presents are just a thousand times more complex than any other type of building. Think about it. If the house is a machine for living, the office for working, what is the airport a machine for?

Travel? I suggest.

Perhaps, Emilio stutters. But if so then that means the airport is a building whose purpose isn't to keep you in but to let you go. You're designing a space for people who hope to spend as little time in it as possible. A worst-case-scenario for an artist who wants their work to be enjoyed and appreciated, wouldn't you say? It's counterintuitive. You have to think of all the demands we put on airports. We want them to be comfortable but efficient. We want them to awe and inspire but not confuse. They have to accommodate hundreds of gates, shops, checkpoints, offices, but you still have to be able to get from one side to the other in under twenty minutes. Right? Have you ever been in an airport that wasn't under construction? They're always being renovated and expanded, because the needs of air travel are always changing. That's why designing an airport is so exciting, because you're creating a space where anything might happen, a place that must contain everything and, ultimately, let everything go.

Emilio has to pretend to feel embarrassed now for talking so much. He ums and ers and fidgets with his pencil.

I don't mean to ramble, he says, I just find the liminality of airports fascinating. There isn't anything else like it. The way that time is crunched and stretched, the way you feel sort of nowhere and everywhere at once. The airport connects the world, but it isn't quite a part of it. It exists inside and outside of time, inside and outside of borders simultaneously. The architect of an airport has to grapple with these metaphysical contradictions, but they also have to deal with

some of the most complex logistical problems imaginable. Like, how do you balance the needs of the passenger with the needs of the plane? How do you get people moving through the terminal as quickly as possible while also getting them to spend as much money as possible while they're here? How do you create a visual experience that's memorable and substantial alongside a truly staggering quantity of brand advertising? The airport architect somehow has to balance these incredibly lofty ideas of time and space with the mundane necessities of travel and consumerism in its basest form. Like a train station, a temple, and a shopping mall, all in one.

Emilio wants to make a gesture now of including me in the conversation. He removes a small legal pad from his bag, explaining that he sometimes takes notes from his conversations with fellow travelers. What would your dream airport look like? he asks, giving me a listening smile, his pencil hovering over paper.

I have to think for several seconds while Emilio waits patiently. I look up at the vaulted ceiling and many-paneled window. I'm not sure if this is the right answer, I say, but honestly, I think I'd like for an airport to feel a little small and sensible. Even homey. All the white metal and glass is a bit cold to me. The scale of it all can feel overwhelming. Maybe some wood and brick here and there. And a ceiling that isn't trying to be the sky. Just a ceiling. Just rooms and walls. But I think that's probably a bad answer.

Not at all, Emilio says as he scribbles. This is why I love talking to people about this, because everyone feels a little differently. That's one of the things that's so amazing about airports, they can contain the grand and the small simultaneously. If you want, you can step out of the vastness of the terminal into a little tasting room, and suddenly you have this cozy, warm experience, wine barrels and tungsten lights. You know what I mean? Whatever you want, it's here.

This isn't quite what I had in mind, but I don't say anything to contradict him. Actually, I'd been picturing an airport that just feels like a house on the inside. Curtains and carpet and a chair in the corner. But of course, this would never work.

For instance, Emilio says, the Denver airport. I was there last month, and it just blew me away.

I was there this morning, I say.

So you know! he says. Second-largest airport in the world. Talk about overwhelming! In the main terminal you have this incredible canopy roof like a circus tent, like air travel is this amazing attraction they've thrown up overnight, and it might move on to the next city in a day or two. You get this sense of enormity and transience, but then the deeper you go you discover this wonderful intimacy and smallness. There are these little lounges and pockets of quiet where you can stop and feel so static and secure.

Emilio pauses now to glance at me, his expression suddenly unsure. A breath escapes unwillingly from his stomach. Then he shakes his head as though he's reached a decision on something. He leans across the table.

What do you know about Denver? he asks.

About Denver?

The Denver airport. You know, about all the conspiracy theories. Illuminati concentration camps, lizard people in underground tunnels, the swastika-shaped runway. That sort of thing.

I tell Emilio that I wasn't aware of any such conspiracy theories. He nods and looks around, tapping his fingers on the table.

It's pretty interesting stuff, he says. Take a look at the landing strip on Google Maps sometime. You'll see what I mean. The lizard, Illuminati stuff is all crap, but the tunnels are real.

I've seen them. One of the engineers on the new renovations is an old friend of mine. I met up with her in Denver last month and she offered to give me a tour of the tunnels. I'm not a conspiracy guy or anything, but it's an airline legend, so I figured, why not. I took her up on it.

We got to the airport, and right away she started scanning us through doors, leading me into backchannels I never knew existed. There were all these hallways and offices and control rooms, massive luggage operations with mile-long conveyor belts. I felt like I was backstage at a play. She brought us into this big boiler room where engineers were scurrying around checking measurements and writing on clipboards. Off to the side, there was a little break room that seemed as if it hadn't been used in a long time, and in the middle of the room there was a dresser. We moved it easily, it was light as a feather. Underneath, there was a covered manhole. I thought she was kidding, but she said it was the only way in. We removed the cover, she gave me a Maglite, and we started climbing down.

They finished construction on the airport in 1995, but I'm telling you, those tunnels were older, *much* older. There was something primeval about them. My friend said they were used to transport luggage, but they seemed more like catacombs to me. Some chambers were completely flooded, others had basically collapsed. We were walking through water almost the entire time. It was dripping through the walls in these rust-red springs. You had to watch your step to make sure you didn't catch your foot on the rebar and concrete that had fallen from the ceiling. Sometimes the beam of my flashlight would drop through the shallow water and illuminate a white fish or a salamander. I pointed them out to my friend. Look at that! I said. Can you believe this? There's a whole ecosystem down here! But she didn't even look, she just kept walking.

We went through all these different chambers. We turned left, right, right, left. I kept asking if she knew how to get back, and she said she would know her way around down there

with her eyes closed. The tunnels were getting narrower and narrower all the time, to the point where our shoulders would scrape the sides. It occurred to me that a baggage truck would never fit through, and I asked my friend what else they'd been used for. She said she didn't know. We kept walking, making turn after turn. We seemed to be moving deeper underground the whole time, but the strange thing was how the air kept getting warmer. And the water, rising around our ankles, then our knees, and our hips, was getting warmer too, like a bath, and there were so many creatures swimming around, tadpoles and minnows, there were lily pads, and there were other things floating in the water too, like picture frames and leatherbound books and cigar boxes.

Finally, the water up to my chest, I called out to my friend. I said, We'd better turn around now! Don't you think? But she was too far ahead, she couldn't hear me. I watched the cone of her light moving further and further away, dancing on the walls. It terrified me to be alone down there. I tried to chase after her, but every step I took I sank deeper into the water until it was up to my chin. I could go no further. I knew that if I took another step the ground would disappear underneath me, and I would sink like a stone into the black water. I'd dropped my flashlight at that point. I kept calling out. Friend! I said. Please, Friend! Come back! We have to go back! Far in the distance, echoing off the tunnel walls, I could hear her singing. *Human again!* she sang. *We'll be human again!* She was just a dot of light moving away down this hole in the Earth. I stood there in the dark, not daring to go further, not daring to turn back. I was waiting for my fear to devour me. I listened to the soft splashings of the things in the water.

Emilio doesn't speak for a minute. He puts his index finger in his mouth, sideways, like a harmonica, and he sucks on it, his lips squishing out from the top and bottom. Then it comes out with a pop, and he finishes his story.

When we got back to the surface, he says, I tried to talk to my friend about what I'd seen, but she said it must've been a gas leak. She said I was hallucinating. She said there were often gas leaks in the tunnels, and it had been stupid and dangerous to make the trip at all. She said I should forget what I'd seen, and I shouldn't try to find the tunnels again.

Emilio looks around at the sunset glowing in the windows and draws an enormous breath into his mouth. I can't forget what I saw and heard down there. But I'll tell you one thing, there's nothing in the world that would compel me to go underground again. The depths, the dark, we don't belong there. They're not for the living. It's the sky, light and crisp air, that's what I want, all I want, from now on. And when I die, I won't be put underground. I'll have my ashes scattered from the wingtip of a cruising jet, and I'll float forever.

He's smiling at me now, lips red, his cheeks big and round like a baby doll. My airport, he says, will be uncovered. Like Palm Springs. Like Huffman Prairie! It will have to be somewhere warm, somewhere it never rains. Egypt or Arizona. There'll be a structure, of course, but only frame, only glass and metal. Dreaded glass and metal! But it will contain nothing, only the air blowing through it, and you'll be able to watch the planes coming in right over your head. It'll all be completely clear and unambiguous, and you'll know exactly where you need to be. There will be a thousand new ways to look at the sky.

I tell Emilio that this sounds very nice, though privately I worry about the potential for sunburns in such a place. He stands up and shakes my hand and tells me he's enjoyed our conversation. With his sketchbook under his arm, he wishes me a safe journey home. He walks off to explore some other corner of the airport. I wonder what gave him the idea that I was going home.

The big family with all the children has moved on. All that's left of them now is the crooked tables, the chairs that haven't been pushed in, and some trash they forgot to throw away. I take out my book and reread the first page. It's better this time around. It seems more profound, more meaningful. The words pierce directly into my mind, like they've been there all along, and I only needed the text to awaken them. But then I keep reading, and everything that comes after is wrong.

On the flight to Tokyo, I watch a hijacking movie on the seatback screen. I admit it's an odd thing to watch on a plane. For most people, it's the last thing they'd want to think about when they're 30,000 feet up in the air. I've flown so much at this point, so perhaps I'm a little desensitized. The idea of a hijacking doesn't scare me exactly, but I have spent plenty of time thinking about it. I often think about dying in a plane crash when I'm on a flight. I can't say for sure that I'm really afraid of it, but it's never far from my mind. It almost feels like a form of protection to imagine the worst possible thing that can happen on a plane, like an offering. Let the plane in my head be destroyed so the real one can survive.

In the movie, they go to great lengths to establish that the hijackers are not affiliated with any particular religion or nationality. It's simply taken for granted that a diverse group of people with no shared culture or history would randomly come together and try to fly a plane into the White House. There's a Black terrorist and an Asian terrorist and even a femme fatale Eastern-European terrorist. Early in the movie, she strangles the pilot with her legs, which, if Hollywood is to be believed, is the only way that women kill men. The lead hijacker's ethnicity is somewhat ambiguous, certainly not Arab, but not White either. He speaks in a cool British accent, which is perfect for delivering menacing speeches over the intercom.

Things play out about as you'd expect. The hero is a retired Navy pilot, and he picks off the bad guys one by one until it's just him and the head hijacker. They fight for control of the plane as it careens over DC, dodging tall buildings, wingtip almost decapitating the Washington Monument. In the climactic conclusion of the fight, the villain punches the hero down to the ground, and the hero struggles to get to his feet. He stops for a few seconds in a kneeling position, blood dripping from his mouth, eyes swollen almost shut. Then something incredible happens. Before he jumps back up to beat the ever-loving-shit out of the hijacker and save the

day, he kisses his own knee. I have to rewind to make sure I saw it right. I watch it over and over again, each time thinking it might disappear. But it's real. He kisses his own knee. And he's wearing shorts! I thought it was a strange costuming decision, but I realize now that it was for this, for the kiss that lasts only a few frames. In a movie with essentially no original ideas, without a single moment of tenderness in its entire two-hour runtime, the kiss comes out of nowhere, like a sudden and terrifying glimpse of another universe. Then the movie gets on with its triumphant finale, and the credits roll.

I stare at the newly black screen, feeling staggered and a little like I have to pee. I'm sitting on the window, and the passengers in the middle and aisle seat are both asleep. It occurs to me that I should stop putting myself in this position. They're sleeping so peacefully. It would be a shame to disturb them. They're a middle-aged couple, two women. They sit slumped together, head on shoulder, cheek smooshed against head. It's a posture of infinite warmth and affection. I really shouldn't wake them. I take out *Bits* and try to read a little, but I can't find my way into the story. I'm more interested in the two brothers sitting in the row ahead of me watching the same animated movie side by side just a few minutes apart. The younger boy glances at his older brother's screen now and then to see what he should be prepared for.

I poke around on the seatback screen and look at the flight map. The plane icon is hovering in the exact middle of the Pacific Ocean. I open the window shade and look down. I start to feel it, a familiar tremble of anticipation, like I'm dangling at the top of a drop tower. I start to feel that the plane and the very principles of flight are suspended by only the thinnest ligaments of belief, and I imagine diving into the sea, an imagining that feels like remembering. I'm falling out of the sky with all these people, in the middle of the day, with no sign of land or life anywhere. An endless, featureless desert of water rushes up at us, the blinding light of the

sun-sparkling waves, impossibly far, coming rapidly closer. We are, every one of us, gruesomely aware of what's happening, and we're unable to change it or to do anything meaningful at all. We merely sit buckled into our seats, transformed by terror, as we begin to understand that this plane is all that exists in the universe, all that has ever existed, and all the promises, all the beautiful stories that we were told, are revealed in this awful moment to be lies. There's just this, this moment when we burst into the cold, clear water.

I have to get up and move now or my head will get away from me. I give my neighbors a soft excuse me, and they stir and sit up. There's a moment of confusion where we all look at each other as though none of this has ever happened before. It's brand new to them, and the expectations are unclear. The middle woman touches a damp spot on her shoulder, drool, and the two of them exchange glances. They let me out, and I go to the bathroom.

When I come back to our row, I realize my mistake. Right away, I can see from the way they're sitting that these women are not in fact a couple, that they're complete strangers to each other. One sits with her hands in her lap, concentrating very hard at the seatback screen in front of her. The other is looking at pictures on her phone, lips pressed together in a tight, pale lump. I feel my face flush with guilt. I could've just held it, and all this would've been avoided. For the rest of the flight now they have to sit in stern silence, not acknowledging each other or how easy it would be, how thin the barrier really is, how they might belong to each other, to anyone at all.

When traveling in the airport, it's common to come upon a long, windowless hallway between terminals. These hallways are always separated into the side with the moving walkway and the side without. The side without always seems to have something to look at along the wall, the traveler's reward for taking the less obvious route. In just such a hallway in the Haneda Airport, people zip by on their way to immigration while I walk slowly down the nonmechanical path, examining advertisements on the wall for a museum in the city. There are the usual suits of armor, bronze Buddhas, manicured gardens, and wood-carved figurines. Then, at the midpoint of the hallway, there's a large board advertising a new gallery. Under a block of Japanese characters, there's a blurb written in English. It reads:

Ukiyo-e ('pictures from the floating world') was a school of painting and printmaking that flourished during the Edo Period in Japan. The artform is famous for its depictions of the vibrant lives of the upper-class Japanese and the kabuki actors, sumo wrestlers, and geishas which defined this age of hedonism and economic prosperity. It is a testament to the vigorous artistry and subtle restraint of these pictures, painted and printed on the thinnest slips of paper, that they were able to have such a significant global impact. In the Tokyo National Museum, you will see a new collection of prints and paintings from the first century of ukiyo-e, featuring love scenes and erotica by the early masters, Moronobu, Kiyonobu, and others.

Further down the wall, there are several smaller boards with pictures of the prints and paintings that tourists can see in the gallery. Some of them show crowded theaters and marketplaces, music circles and dancers. Many feature women in elaborate silks, the borders of their slender figures sharply drawn and removed from the sparse or non-existent backdrops. Most of the paintings, however, are quite explicit. The positions and combinations of the copulating partners vary widely. There are men and women, men and boys, threesomes and foursomes of

bathing women. In one, a woman receives cunnilingus from an octopus while the creature winds its tentacles around her legs and breasts. The vaginas are meaty and elaborate, the penises red and bulbous. There's an unusual level of attention given to the precise textures and angles of penetration while the faces of the fornicators are minimalistic and seem to express no pleasure at all. It's remarkable to me that such images can be displayed in the airport where children might walk by and see them.

One particularly graphic painting depictions a wife who's caught her husband having sex with another woman. The husband, gathering up his clothes in a bundle, flees toward the edge of the painting while the wife beats her husband's lover over the head with a club. The wife has a vicious grip on the lover's pubic hair, exposing her vagina to the viewer. Strangely, the actors in this drama don't seem to care much about what they're doing. Their faces are completely without emotion. Even the husband's lover seems uninterested in this brutal and humiliating attack. She doesn't try to defend herself. She just hangs her head with resignation or maybe even boredom. She stares out into the middle of the painting where there should be a wooden floor but instead is only empty paper.

More than the images themselves, what tugs at my imagination is the name, *ukiyo*, the floating world. It doesn't occur to me to wonder where this world floats, in water or air. It has to be air. And why, I wonder, is it pictures from the floating world and not pictures of the floating world, as though the artists themselves had lived in this suspended place. I imagine that when they were done with their pictures, they would drop them from the clouds, and the sheets would drift for a long time before they found their way into the tops of trees or the hands of the groundlings, jumping to catch them.

There isn't much time now until my flight departs for Doha. I leave the walkway and go to find my gate. When I get there, people are already standing around waiting to board. The gate agent is making announcements over the intercom in Japanese. I imagine it's the usual speech about carry-on bags, but there's no way to know for sure. In fact, it could be something quite different from what I'm used to, something highly specific. Now boarding all women over the age of forty-five, she might be saying, and any passengers born in the month of May. If you're sitting in an exit row, please come to the counter to take a test on your reflexes and critical thinking skills.

I always feel that I'm missing things when I travel in an unfamiliar language. Actually, I feel this way everywhere I go, but in Tokyo it's especially tempting to think I've missed an announcement or misread a sign and ended up in the wrong place. The feeling I often have, that I have now as I line up to board, is that somewhere, in some distant corner of the airport, my real plane is getting ready to leave. In another terminal far away, they're boarding at my gate, my real gate. They're about to close the doors, they're calling my name, but I can't hear them, or I can't understand the message. I keep moving up the line at the wrong gate for the wrong plane, and I put up little resistance against this error, only a glance over my shoulder as though I hope to see someone running toward me, running to save me.

The flight to Doha is long, and I decide I'm going to buck up and finish my book. It's just over a hundred pages, so it shouldn't take more than a few hours to get to the end. The story is about two estranged sisters who reunite to care for their mother with dementia. The old woman is full of memories, only they're the wrong memories, involving people who never existed and events that never took place. It's supposed to be very frightening. The reader is supposed to feel that a person without accurate memories is no longer a person, they might as well be dead. There are many overwritten passages where one of the sisters will give their mother some token from the past, and her bony fingers will close around such-and-such an object, and for a few seconds she will become her old self again. Things seem to be building toward a return to the impoverished hometown where the girls grew up, where there will surely be many reconciliations and revelations, but at this point I give up. I can't read another word.

The problem is that the book wants you to sympathize with the sisters but not with the mother. You're supposed to pity them for everything they're going through, and you're supposed to understand that the old woman's demented memories are the most startling and upsetting manifestation of this whole ordeal. But I can't help but find her imagined memories wonderful. They're the only moments of mystery and delight in a story otherwise obsessed with reality. An attic with a limping phantom, a drowned orchestra, a circus man who can chew glass into sand. They're so bright and pretty compared to the daughters' dull recollections of poverty. I would read a book of nothing but imagined memories. What an interesting way to study a person, not by what they remember but by what they want to remember. It seems completely natural for a mind that's forgotten itself to try to invent something to replace what it's lost. Much better to be full of false memories than to exist as a lonely, isolated consciousness cut off from the past, from any semblance of life, real or imagined.

I abandon the book in the seatback pocket marked literature only. If literature it is, then literature can have it.

I open the flight map and see that we're flying over Nepal. Mt. Everest is just off to the right, marked with a little green triangle. The man sitting in the window seat is asleep, his head resting against the shuttered window. Up and down the cabin, people are watching movies and poking at their phones, but no one is looking out the window. Why not, I wonder? Don't they want to see the tallest mountain in the world? Or do they know something I don't? I read somewhere that Mt. Everest is the height of the cruising altitude of a plane. Shouldn't we all be crowding around the windows, waving to the climbers at the peak? But we keep flying out of the mountains.

The young man in the middle seat is playing video games on his laptop. In the game, he's a lone soldier in a ruined metropolis doing battle against an army of demons. I watch as he makes a final stand atop a pile of concrete and rebar, firing hundreds of bullets into a seemingly endless horde rising around him like water. He lobs grenades into the mass of bodies. Scaly limbs launch into the air, and a pink mist rains down. It's impressive work, but he can't hold out forever. Only after running out of every type of munition is he finally overrun. The demons tear him apart, ripping open his stomach and uncoiling his intestines. The words YOU DIED cover the screen from edge to edge.

After watching him die like this half a dozen times, the young man notices my interest, and we strike up a conversation. His name is Tunde. He's an international student at the Tokyo Institute of Technology on his way home to Nigeria to visit his family. He asks me if I like video games, and I say I don't know, I don't really play them.

This is Infernal Combat, he says. It's one of my favorites. But you must think I'm not very good at it.

No, not at all, I say. I was thinking you put up quite a fight.

Tunde gives a good-natured chuckle. This is endless mode, he explains. I've already beat the campaign mode on the hardest difficulty, and it's just not much of a challenge for me. Maybe it sounds strange, but sometimes I don't even want to win. It feels good to lose sometimes. In endless mode, the game doesn't end until you die, so I like it.

Tunde starts up another round. He keeps talking, the conversation taking up only a fraction of his focus. His voice is louder than it needs to be, drawing the glances of passengers across the aisle. The sound of gunfire and bombs in his ears must be deafening.

I like games that give you lots of freedom, Tunde says. Games with lots of mods, sandbox games, that type of thing. Single-player campaigns are fine, but they don't hold my attention for that long. That's because I'm always more interested in the story in my head than the one in the game. I always have a story going in my head when I'm gaming. I've got a different story for every game. For instance, when I play Infernal Combat, I like to imagine that I'm one of the last survivors of the demon invasion, and me and my family have been traveling for hundreds of miles to reach the last city on Earth where people can still live in peace. We've been on this journey for years, and then, just a few miles from the gates of the city, we're attacked by a demon horde. And even though I'm half-dead from the journey, I have to fight them somehow. I have to hold them off long enough so my wife and children can make it to safety. With every bullet I fire, every grenade I throw, I imagine another year my family will get to live, my children growing up, getting older, becoming their own people, without me. And the tragic thing is, as the demon corpses pile up around me, I start to wonder if maybe I can make it

out of this. Maybe I can find a way to defeat them, and I'll get to rejoin my family and share this life with them. It's a false hope, of course. They kill me in the end. But even as they're tearing me apart, in my final seconds of consciousness, I still can't quite believe it. In my head, I'm still thinking, maybe, just maybe.

Tunde fires a rocket at an enormously fat demon. It skewers the monster through the belly, launches it high into the air, and explodes in a firework of blood and guts.

Other times, Tunde says, I like to pretend I'm the last person on Earth. No family, no city, just me. All that's left of the world is in me. All the names, all the songs and stories, everything that's ever happened to us lives only in me. And I'm not fighting to save anyone, not even to survive, but just to keep it going for another second, another second, another second.

Tunde is killed. They open his ribcage and pull out his heart, still beating, blood squirting from the arteries. He laughs.

You must think I'm some crazy guy, he says. Trust me, it's very cathartic. Here. Why don't you give it a try.

He hands over the controller. He shows me how to aim, shoot, run, jump. Slaughtering demons looks easy when Tunde does it, but I can't even manage to face the right direction most of the time. After firing off a few harmless shots, I'm killed by a single emaciated demon that beats me to death with its stick-like arms. Tunde is pleased with my performance.

See what I mean? he says.

I nod, though privately I don't understand the appeal. Maybe I just need to come up with the right story for my poor soldier. Maybe he never wanted this, any of this.

The little demon patiently and calmly devours my corpse as YOU DIED blinks on the screen. This time, you is me. I give the controller back to Tunde, and he starts to play another

round. The problem now is that there isn't anything more to say, but it doesn't feel right to just go back to ignoring each other. I think this is the worst part about having conversations on an airplane. The proximity of the seats creates an intimacy that quickly becomes oppressive, and then there's no good way to disengage. Now and then, Tunde will say something like, I keep messing up these headshots, and I'll say, oh, but after a while we give this up too. Then there's just the moan of the engines and the clitter-clack of the buttons under Tunde's thumbs, and still so much time before we land.

We're flying over India now, Uttar Pradesh. I get up and go to the back of the plane where there's a window the size of a teacup saucer. I look out, but it takes a long time for my eyes to adjust. The sky is just so full of light. At last, I can start to make something out. Way down below, patches of green.

I'm trying to remember if I've been to the airport in Doha before. It feels like an airport I might've visited in a dream, like the glitter and extravagance of all the airports in the world sieved through a fevered mind into one enormous spectacle. It really is spectacular, yet somehow unsurprising. Floating walkway through a canopy of palms, ferrari f80 on a spinning platform across from the KFC. Well, why not? It's all so appealingly familiar. In places it's like an indoor arboretum with cathedralesque glass ceilings, then it's a modern art museum with hanging sculptures that turn and glow and change colors. Then in the middle of the main terminal there's a rubber duck the size of a house for no reason surrounded on all sides by Dior, Chanel, Armani, Coach, the shop doors open, glowing a heavenly, arctic white. There are screens all over the place, screens of all shapes and sizes, but mostly huge, mostly shining blue and red, on every surface, on the walls and floors and ceilings, leaning, hanging, peering up and down at you, panning from chin to chest, great pair of lips, soft and pink, coming apart, creaseless, spotless cheeks, imagine, skin like that. Cut to strap on a bare shoulder, cut to eyes peeking over dark sunglasses, a hand, a ring, a nice strong jaw, nice Roman nose, not the whole body, but the good bits. It's hard to tell exactly what's being advertised, what's being sold, but it doesn't really matter, you're just supposed to buy something, some of it, all of it, buy this feeling, to be beautiful, important, to be loved, no, not quite, but good, to feel really good. And I do feel good walking through all this. It fills me with this good feeling until there's nothing left, nothing left of me to think or worry, and I'm almost enlightened, almost one with the enormous nothingness. Here's a lovely face, here's another, and another. It's the same face, really. There's only one when it comes to beauty.

I'm hungry. I drift through the duty-free shops looking at black licorice mascara and buttery lotion, and my stomach gradually gets tighter and tighter until I realize I've never been so

hungry in my life. Before I can even think to look for one, there's a bistro and a waiter and a table. Thank you, I say. I sit down facing the terminal so I can watch the people walking by with their shopping bags. Soon there's Coke and asparagus and potatoes and steak, and it tastes good. The waiter wears a black suit. There's a radio clipped to his belt and a cable that runs from the radio to a device in his ear. He smiles sleepily at me as he clears my plate. Anything else? Ice cream, I say, and he brings me this too and the bill. Take your time, he says. I do. I take little bites. I coat the back of the spoon then lick it clean. I make it take as long as possible, but the last bite has to be big, a really big bite. It's sweet, and then it's gone.

Directly across from the restaurant there's a grand piano in front of a 10-foot-tall TAG Heuer ad board. As I sit and wait for the inspiration to get up and leave, an old man comes along to study the piano, stopping just on the other side of the stanchion barrier that surrounds it. He looks like an old man from a fairy tale. He looks like he doesn't have a home anywhere in the world. Or maybe the airport is his home. Maybe there's a bathroom cupboard somewhere nearby that he crawls into to sleep at night. His hair's messy, his clothes are too big for him, and his sleeves are stained with snot. He carries two heavy paper bags, their bottoms prepared to give out at a moment's notice. He sets them down on the ground before stepping carefully over the barrier. Taking his time, he pulls out the bench and sits. He looks at the piano, studying it from top to bottom. He examines the keys, touching but not playing them. Then he peeks underneath as though he might find a wild animal curled up asleep instead of pedals. After a long time, without bothering to roll up his sleeves, he starts to play.

The song is barely audible over the noise of the restaurant and the intercom summoning passengers to their gates. But if I strain my attention, I can make out most of the notes, which are sparse and seem barely connected, following one after the other almost by accident. The old man

plays searchingly, as though trying to recall the song from another life. At times he seems on the verge of giving up, and I half expect him to throw down his hands and walk away. But a melody does take shape. It's a spare and childish song, yet it seems to contain the shriveled seed of something great, like a crayon reproduction of a masterpiece. It makes me think of great battles fought by wind-up soldiers and the sweeping romances of half-remembered dreams. It's a song for a kindergarten in the sky, for cloud princes who've heard tales of the sorrows and yearnings of the world but never felt them. As I listen, I can't shake the sense of a quiet disaster descending, like a distant glimpse of the end of happiness.

A security guard approaches the piano, and the old man stops playing. They speak to each other in Arabic, which I don't understand, but the gist of the conversation is clear.

Excuse me, sir, the guard says. I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to step onto the other side of the barrier.

Why? says the old man, maintaining his position on the piano bench. I'm not doing anything wrong, am I?

I'm afraid you are, sir. The piano is not for public use. It's reserved for special performances approved by the Hamad International Airport Event Coordination Committee. He says this or something to the same effect.

Oh. I didn't know it wasn't for public use, says the old man. There's no sign. There ought to be a sign if it's not for public use.

There's a barrier, sir, says the guard, growing impatient. Even a child understands that a barrier means an area is off limits. Now please, step outside the barrier.

The old man doesn't give an inch of ground. The tone of his voice becomes agitated, and he sits up straight on the bench. Young man, do you have any idea who I am?

I don't, sir, says the guard.

I will tell you, says the old man. My name is Farid Abdulmassih. I'm a pianist, composer, and conductor. From 1968 to 1971 I was the sole pupil of the master, Arthur Rubinstein. I've given concerts in the Burgtheater in Vienna, the Palais Garnier in Paris, and in every major concert hall across Europe and the Arab world. From 1991 until 2005 I was the general music director and head conductor of the Royal Opera House in Riyadh and performed for the likes of King Fahd bin Abdulaziz and Sheikh Maktoum bin Rashid and President Bill Clinton. You say that this piano is reserved for special performances. Believe me, young man, if I so much as bump my elbow on the keys, it's a special performance. If I cough in the vicinity of a wind instrument, it's a special performance. If I pick my nose–

The guard, who's been listening politely, interjects. Sir, I don't doubt that your credentials are as extensive as you say, but that is completely beside the point. The matter has nothing to do with your abilities as a musician. The fact remains that you've not been approved by the Event Coordination Committee to play at this time. Everyone must adhere to the rules and regulations of this airport. If Arthur Rubinstein himself sat down to play at this piano without being approved by the proper channels, I assure you, sir, I would say the exact same thing to him. We all have a duty to conduct ourselves lawfully and honorably. Qatar is a young country taking its first steps out onto the world's stage. There are many who would like to see us fail, who would like to see us devolve into anarchy. But we must defy our detractors. We must not be seen to give an inch of ground. We must be steadfast and unbending in even the smallest things.

All at once, the guard and the old man are laughing. They are talking over the top of each other, babbling like old friends. I think perhaps they are old friends. It's possible I misinterpreted the tone of the conversation.

The guard steps over the barrier and joins the old man on the piano bench. The seat is small, and they sit with their shoulders pressed together. After getting settled, the guard jabs puckishly at the keys, and the old man smacks his hand away. They fall silent as the old man demonstrates a simple melody. The guard tries to reproduce it, hitting several false notes, and they both laugh some more. The old man gives another patient demonstration, then another. The guard becomes serious, earnestly trying to learn his part. The old man nods approvingly and strikes up a bouncy chord progression. Then he starts to sing.

He sings in Arabic, no, I think French, maybe both. I'd like to know what the words mean, but it's not important. You can tell it's the sort of song where the words don't matter. It's just a dancing song, a party song, a song about feeling good, feeling good from now on, forever.

Without meaning to, I get up and walk away. It's still early, but I think I might as well scope out my next gate. As I walk through the terminal, I'm suddenly aware of all the languages in the air, Arabic and Spanish and Korean and Dutch. It's baffling if I let myself think about all the words swirling around me, and they all mean something, but not to me. It's a shame I speak no languages other than English. The airport would be a very different place if you could talk to anyone, understand everyone. I wonder why I don't try to learn a little. I could download one of those apps. The long flights would give me lots of time to drill vocabulary. But somehow, I know I won't do it. I have no aptitude for learning languages. Or not aptitude, inclination. I suppose I just don't want to, and there's no point in wanting to want something you don't want.

There's a wine bar next to my gate. I sit down for a drink. They keep it dark in here, the tables lit by just a few dangling bulbs. I think it's supposed to feel quite cozy and intimate. The waiters wear merlot-red shirts and black aprons, and they move around the room with perfect posture. The walls of the booths are high so you can't see into the terminal. This is intentional.

You're supposed to come here and forget that you're in the airport. You're supposed to imagine you're in some tasting room in a vineyard in Tuscany. In the airport, Emilio said, you can have anything you want, even if that thing is not-the-airport. But I disagree. I think you can have anything you want, so long as it is the airport, because the airport can't be anything but itself. You can feel this just in the base material of it, the solid airport stuff. Every inch of it has a papery-plasticy thinness to it, as though it was put up in a rush a few minutes before you walked in. It's like a cheap tabletop model of itself, like a poorly rendered concept image, like a movie set that was only ever used for one scene. It's a cheap illusion, but if you're just passing through, if you don't look too closely, you might believe you're in a real place.

They have flights, flights of wine, which is perfect for me. I always get tired of a wine as I drink it. I just want a little sip of everything.

For the past ten minutes, the man sitting next to me has been watching the same execution video over and over on his iPad. He must think I'm asleep, or maybe he just doesn't think what he's doing is strange. In the video, a man kneels on the floor in a concrete room. He doesn't look afraid, only a little impatient, like he's waiting for a bus. Another man stands over him. He points a pistol at his head and shoots. The gun flashes, and the man tips over. There's no blood. It takes less than a second.

The scene plays back again. The man is alive, kneeling on the ground, then the gun, the flash of light, and he falls.

Again. Gun, flash, fall.

He studies every frame of the clip. He moves backwards and forwards between the flash and the fall, searching for the still moment that will unlock this for him. He notices that the man's mouth opens a centimeter just after the gun goes off. Is this the moment when the will is cut and the mind loses control of the body? He moves back a single frame. A yellow light from the barrel of the gun, the bullet perhaps still traveling through the chamber, through the air, through the wall of the skull. Forward one frame. The mouth is open, and this is the moment, it must be, he's thrust into blackness, his head smacks the concrete, but it doesn't hurt him. Back one frame. Alive. Forward one. Dead. Alive. Dead. Alive. He can take it apart piece by piece and isolate every millisecond, but it's not enough. The mystery evades him. He keeps pinching the screen, trying to get closer, as though he wants to watch from inside the doomed man's head. He wants to hide inside and watch the light come in as the fragments of skull split apart. He wants to follow the bullet as it travels slowly, slowly through the brain like a stone melting all spring through the snow. But it's not enough.

When we land in Copenhagen, I follow my seatmate through the airport until he turns off toward baggage claim. I'm staying airside, going on to Toronto. But there are windows looking down at the luggage carousels, and from here, I can see him reuniting with his wife and a little blonde boy who jumps into his arms. He unzips his backpack, takes something out, and gives it to his son. I'm too far away to make it out, but whatever it is thrills the boy. Now the wife goes out, maybe to check on the car, and father and son walk over to the carousel to wait for the bags. He holds the boy on his hip and stands in front of the empty belts going around and around. They talk, father and son, both looking down at the thing in the boy's hands, his gift.

I end up in the middle seat on my flight to Toronto. I don't know how I keep letting this happen. Another long flight without easy access to the bathroom. And I'm sitting at the front of economy, which is the worst possible placement for the bathroom, in my opinion, because the first-class bathroom is tantalizingly close, but off-limits, and the economy bathroom is all the way at the back of the plane. This time, I decide to make a plan. When the aisle-seat passenger comes, I'll be friendly and exchange polite chit-chat. If I establish a connection early on, it should make getting in and out easier during the flight.

I know I spend too much time thinking about my bodily functions. Even when I don't actively need a toilet, I'm always thinking about the quickly approaching point in the future when I will, and I'm thinking about where I'll be then and how urgent it will be and where the closest toilets will be and what options, if any, will be available to me to choose between varying degrees of privacy and cleanliness. It's a waste of a mind, I know. It shames me to think of all the intelligent and beautiful thoughts I could be having instead. The problem is that when I have to pee, or when I'm afraid I might have to pee, I lose all sense of myself. I lose the ability to think about anything, to feel anything. All affection, empathy, interest, and humor is dead in me until I get my relief. Really, it's a matter of self-preservation. If I want to exist, fully human, the toilet needs to be guaranteed.

At last, my neighbor shows up with a leather laptop bag and tattoos on the fingers that grip the handle, beetles and bees. I've sat on her seatbelt on purpose to force an interaction. There's a quick shuffle and scootch, I think you're, Oh gosh, sorry about that, and then it's the usual questions. Her name is Dana. She's been in Copenhagen this past week for a friend's wedding, now on her way to Toronto to attend a conference. I ask her what the conference is on,

and she says it's an anthropology conference, the joint meeting of the American Anthropological Association and the Canadian Anthropological Society. Dana, it turns out, is a professor of cultural anthropology at McGill University. I must look surprised to hear this, because she offers to prove it, digging a school ID out of her wallet which shows her name and picture and the word faculty. She certainly doesn't look like the typical college professor with her ratty hoodie, buzzed black hair, and tattoos that climb all the way up her neck and tuck behind her ears. I think her students must adore her.

As the plane pushes back from the gate, I ask Dana about the research she's going to present at the conference. Her subfield, she tells me, is cyber ethnography. She's co-published papers on living dolls, Christian fundamentalist furries, 9/11 conspiracy theorists on 4chan, and pro-anorexia groups on Reddit. Her current research is focused on a private Facebook community called Endless Summer where adult men pretend to be adolescent girls. In her paper, forthcoming in the American Anthropologist, Dana argues that Endless Summer represents a new category of non-sexual roleplaying which she's termed platonic transgender ageplay, distinct from fetishes like paraphilic infantilism and diaper lovers.

Dana wears a pair of headphones around her neck that are always about to go on. She picks them up, lets them hover over her ears for a moment, but then there's another question to ask, another term that needs to be defined. Rapidly, my desire to establish a reliable gate to the bathroom turns into genuine interest in this woman.

Are you sure you want to hear about this shit? she says. Most people clutch their pearls at the slightest mention of paraphilic infantilism.

I insist that she tell me more, and she does, though she retains some skepticism. She addresses me with a tone of not-unkind condescension, like I'm a younger cousin sitting at the grown-up table for the first time. Still, I think she likes me, and I want her to like me more.

We're in the air at this point. Dana takes out her laptop and sets it up on the tray table. She opens a folder containing notes, drafts, interview transcripts, and hundreds of screenshots from the Endless Summer community page. Each member has a profile page where they cultivate their imagined pubescent girl identities, Dana explains. They post updates on their fictional lives with AI pictures of their girl-selves. She shows me images of girls at school, in their bedrooms, on hikes, selfies with family members and pets. Some of them are quite good at using AI, and their avatars are convincingly realistic, complete with acne and greasy hair and clothes that are becoming too small for their growing bodies. But most are uncanny, with faces that are too perfectly symmetrical aside from eyes with split pupils or smiles with too many teeth. One particularly old-fashioned user employs photoshop to give his girl-self the likeness of a young Chloe Grace Moretz.

From here, Dana shares a sample of annotated posts that she's been given permission to use in her presentation. I read a few of them while she watches my reactions.

September 22, 2023. Anabell Steiner, age 14 (William T., age 50): Feeling frustrated with myself today. Been blocked on this song I'm trying to write and can't find a way through. Hard to admit you're not as good at something as you think you are. I believe in music but I don't believe in me.

Top comment from Jenny Sawyer, age 14 (unidentified member): Dont give up. Sometimes u just have 2 keep going 2 keep going. u havent failed til u give up.

July 5, 2023. Emiko Mori, age 13 (Joshua J., age 39): KATSUKO CAME HOME TODAY!!!!! six months ago the said there was only a 5% chance of survival well today we brought her home from the vet cancer free!! thank you to all who sent prayers couldnt have made it through these hard times without you guys!

January 19, 2024. Allie Cuevas, age 15 (David M., age 55): I'm bisexual. I've known for a long time. I've been hiding it from my parents. (Context: my parents are EXTREMELY religious.) So scared to tell them, but even more scared to be only half myself. What do I do????

Top comment from Francesca De Luca, age 16 (unidentified member): Cant tell you its going to be okay. Cant tell you your parents will love you no-matter-what. But the truth is you cant afford to keep this hidden. You cant afford to not be yourself. You have to be your 100% yourself 100% of the time. End of discussion. But believe me The love you feel for yourself when you allow yourself to be yourself is stronger than any other love in the universe.

Dana closes her laptop halfway and gives me a sideways glance. Questions so far? she says. Impressions?

It's fascinating, I say.

Dana laughs. Could you be a little more specific? Suddenly it's easy to picture her at the front of a classroom, sitting on the desk, leaning forward, waiting for an answer.

They have such hard lives, I say.

Yes, says Dana. That's exactly right. It's not the typical male fantasy of teenage girlhood, wouldn't you say? Their invented problems might be simplistic, a little unimaginative maybe,

but they're problems. It seems that a large part of the appeal for these men is to simulate the hardship and emotional intensity of female adolescence. Or, to put it another way, their perception of female adolescence involves a great deal of hardship and emotional intensity.

Dana clicks through a few more documents. She stops on a picture of a frowning AI girl in a hospital bed. She lingers here, seemingly lost in a new train of thought. Then she looks over her shoulder as though she hears something in the rows behind us. She decides its nothing and continues with her lecture.

Just to be clear, she says, there's no sexual ageplay on the ES page, none at all. And none of my contacts in ES know about sexual ageplay going on outside the group either. Most of them had never even heard the term ageplay. They were appalled by the very idea that what they were doing could appear from the outside to be a fetish. Lots of the ES members I talked to are fathers. Many of them have careers and rich social lives. Most of them reported feeling no gender dysphoria at all, no significant dissatisfaction with their real lives. So, we can't really think of this as escapism or voyeurism, at least not in the conventional sense.

So, why do they do it? I ask.

Dana smiles. Why do you think?

She looks at me like she can read my thoughts. She raises an eyebrow, teasing me, but teasing not because of what I'm thinking but that I should feel too embarrassed to say it. I'm suddenly more aware of her physical presence, her shoulder pressed against mine, the toe of her shoe starting to drift into my legroom, and her smell, faintly sandy and warm.

I don't know, I say. I guess it seems a little absurd. If they don't want to be teen girls, then why would they do it?

Dana laughs. I didn't say they don't want to be teen girls. Probably some of them do. I imagine it's different for each individual. There's certainly desire at play here, plenty of desire, only it comes from a different place than we might expect. To be frank with you, I don't know why they do it, and I don't really care. A psychologist would give you some theory of behavior based on rats, but that's a field of science on par with astrology and tarot cards. Me, I'm not interested in why they do it but *that* they do it and *how* they do it, and I want to understand this and communicate it as clearly and fully as I can. Most people I talk to can't stomach this stuff. Even other academics think it's perverted and pedophilic. Maybe it is. It's not my place to say. But when you look at it seriously, it's really not that unusual. This sort of elaborate role-playing is everywhere in our culture. Children do it on the playground, and adults do it on the internet, in their DnD groups, in the stories they read and write. Isn't it just a natural desire? Don't you think? One life isn't enough. We want to imagine ourselves as other people, even to become them. I think we're disturbed by groups like Endless Summer because we see ourselves in them. It scares us to see people who are willing to express their longing so publicly and shamelessly. We're afraid to admit that we hide desires that are just as strange and powerful, and we're afraid of what they would do to us if we let them out.

It seems that Dana is about to come to the thesis of her argument, but a nervous murmuring from behind interrupts her. The world she has immersed me in is so dazzling that I'm slow to wake up to the new world of emergency sprouting around us. The murmuring expands into a roar of shouting and scrambling. There's a thud, a scream, and the sound of a hundred people all turning around in their seats. He's got a knife! someone says. He's headed for the cockpit! I unbuckle, turn around, and peer over the crowd of panic-stricken passengers at a man running up the aisle. He has no hair on his head or face or body, which is strangely unclothed

and glistening with oil. He holds something out in front of him, apparently a knife. He looks like a general leading a cavalry charge. As he comes nearer, I can hear him shouting. NONE OF THIS IS REAL, he says, NONE OF THIS IS REAL. He chews the words, making the tendons in his face turn white.

With a sweep of her arm, Dana gives me her laptop and pushes me down into my seat.

I'm going to take him, she says.

I don't have time to question her or even ask what this means, because she's already doing it. She steps out into the aisle just as the man is about to pass our row. She takes hold of his outstretched arm and rotates, using her body as a wedge, flipping him over her back. He falls with a crash that shakes the plane. She leaps on him. She puts him in a headlock, and his face starts turning red. He can't breathe, but I can still see him mouthing, none of this is real, none of this is real. Every tooth in Dana's mouth shines in the stage-blue cabin lights. I know it's the strain of wrestling such a large, slippery man, but she looks like she's smiling. She looks ecstatic, thrilled. My whole body flushes with excitement.

Other passengers throw themselves on the man, relieving Dana to crawl away and collect the knife. She holds it up for me to see, shaking her head.

Plastic, she says. Still has fucking schmear on it.

A flight attendant comes with duct tape, but it won't stick to his skin, so instead they have to carry him to the back of the plane. They hold him by the wrists and ankles like they're going to throw him in a swimming pool. His head lolls back and forth as they go. He seems almost happy now, amused with this new situation. He even laughs when someone loses their grip on an oily limb, and he hits his cheek on an armrest. None of this is real, he says to a child

passenger. Friendly now, passing along some interesting news. None of this is real. Thought you'd like to know.

They put him in the rear bathroom. Three large men guard the door. Dana comes back to her seat. Her lip is split, not badly, just a thin red dash down the middle of a lip that is otherwise soft and dark and smooth. The look on my face makes her laugh.

Judo, she says, as though this explains it all. Then she sits down, takes a breath, and starts to cry. She puts her head in her hands and moans.

Fuck that was scary, she says.

Reality catches up with me. In an instant, the events of the last two minutes crystalize and appear before me as a frozen image. A man has tried to bring down the plane. I see this, believe it, but for some reason it doesn't frighten me. In fact, it seems perfectly ordinary, perfectly understandable. Dana is crying, shaking with fear, but I'm not afraid. I feel good, in fact, really good. I'm full of courage and admiration.

That was fucking impressive is what it was, I say. You threw that guy like twelve feet.

Dana comes up laughing, tears streaming down her cheeks. I give her a tissue. She takes it, blows her nose, and dabs at her bloody lip.

He was so greasy, she says. She can barely get the words out, she's laughing so hard. He was so greasy, he just slipped out of my hands.

Our plane makes an emergency landing at the Keflavík International Airport. After the Icelandic police take the naked man away, the rest of us deplane. We crowd into buses that carry us across the tarmac to a little airport that looks like it was built out of repurposed longship boards and volcanic glass. There are lots of official looking people running around, police

wearing body armor, carrying guns. The airport is in a state of emergency, but for me and Dana, it seems the trouble is over. No one stops us. No one tries to talk to Dana about what happened. She doesn't seem to find it strange. She doesn't seem to feel the need to report to these important people or even look at them. It's as though what she's done has affected no one else, as though it happened only for us, our private circus.

We find our way into an enormous line of people waiting to demand compensation from a single trembling Air Canada representative. I hold our place in line while Dana runs to the bathroom to clean the blood and oil off of her. When she comes back, she's talking on the phone. She sounds annoyed, or maybe it's just that she's speaking in French. She rolls her eyes at me, half listening to the stream of anxiety pouring through the speaker. She says something to the effect of, Okay, okay, I have to go, and hangs up the phone.

My colleague, she chuckles. In her mouth, the word is somehow both dear and detestable, as though she meant to say my mother or my ex or my parole officer. He's never had much of a stomach for danger, she says. I should've just told him my flight got delayed and left it at that.

We make it to the front of the line. Dana steps up to the counter, and I come with her. I suddenly feel childish, like a lost duckling. I worry I've made too large an assumption, but Dana says nothing. She gives no indication that what I've done wasn't the natural and correct thing to do. The young woman behind the counter must think that Dana and I are traveling together, husband and wife, colleagues. She seems close to tears with the news she's about to give us. The next flight leaving for Toronto departs at 3:35 AM, and there's only one seat left.

I insist that Dana take the seat. She tries to fight, but I'm immovable. I want too badly to feel magnanimous.

That's your seat, I say. We're not arguing about this

Dana bites the tip of her finger. The flight gets in a little before six, she says. That'll give me enough time to take a shower in the hotel, maybe even sleep for an hour before the conference. Are you sure?

You kidding me? I say. You're the hero of the day. You're taking that seat.

After some coaxing, Dana accepts her ticket for the 3:35 AM flight, and I take one for 1:10 PM. We step out of line, leaving the young Air Canada employee to her fate.

It's five o'clock. Dana's flight boards in ten hours. We find a bench under an enormous skylight and sit down. Dana digs through her purse for an inhaler. She takes a puff and sinks into the bench. We sit side by side in silence for several minutes, too dazed to speak, staring up at the cloudless Arctic sky. I listen to a conversation happening somewhere nearby, enjoying the funny sounds of the Icelandic language, all the shushing and thuthing.

In Judo, Dana says after a while, you're supposed to grab the other guy by his collar or his sleeve or something. Pretty much every throw requires clothes to hold onto.

So, I guess a naked, buttery man is sort of a worst-case-scenario for you, I say.

It really is, she laughs. I guess that's why he did it. Not that he knew there would be a Judo brownbelt on the plane, but you know what I mean.

You're a brownbelt? I say. Is that good?

Oh yeah, she says. It's pretty fucking good. I was just thinking, I'm gonna have to have a word with my sensei about slippery opponents when I get back to Montreal.

I ask Dana about Montreal. Does she like the city? Does she like her job? She tells me about the campus and her neighborhood, about her students and family. Her dad is from Jamaica, her mom from Quebec, divorced, but they both live ten minutes away from her apartment which

she shares with a pit bull named Big Boss. No boyfriend is mentioned, though her colleague, who isn't given a name, comes up too many times for comfort.

But I want to hear about your life, she says. What's your deal? Give me the lowdown, job, friends, family.

She wants to hear about my life. What should I tell her? That my life is up there, way up there, in that plane flying over Iceland without stopping to land? Up there is my life, I might say, in that little white cross, tailless and silent, alone in the sky as big as death. And I can't seem to imagine what's happening inside that plane, what the people are drinking, what they're saying to each other. I can't seem to believe that they're up there fighting for elbow room and adjusting the air vents and watching movies on the seatback screens. They don't even know I'm not there.

It seems I'm taking too long to answer. Dana squints into the silence. I can fuck off, also, she says. We can just shake hands, and I'll go find some dark corner of the airport to watch car crash videos. I'm sure you have people you need to call and tell about how you almost died.

No, please stay, I say. I'll tell you anything. I'm an open book.

Fine, man, she says. Just give me the Sparknotes. What's your family like?

Actually, I say, I'm an orphan. So, no family. Just me.

Oh, she says. I'm sorry.

And I don't have too many friends either, because I'm always traveling. You see, I'm a traveling businessman.

Dana snorts. Is that so? And what does a traveling businessman do?

Well, I say, sometimes I'm buying, sometimes I'm selling. It all depends on the contract.

Yes, of course, she says. How about hobbies?

I watch a lot of movies, I say. I love movies. And TV. I particularly enjoy those nature documentaries where crocodiles let birds eat the rotten scraps of meat from between their teeth. And sometimes, when I see a bird, a small bird like a sparrow, I feel a powerful urge to put it in my mouth.

There's a moment where I think it's not going to work, where Dana frowns at me, unconvinced. But then comes a smile that can't be held back. I haven't won yet, but the game goes on.

We find a place to sit down and have dinner. The excitement of the flight has mostly worn off by now, and we're both much more relaxed after bowls of kjötsúpa and a few Icelandic beers. We eat at the bar. Our position with each other matches our seats on the plane, me on the right and she on the left. Somehow, I think it would feel wrong to sit across from her at one of these dark tables. We face the same direction, staring past the bar at a massive glowing ad for the Blue Lagoon.

Maybe we should take a dip, she says. We've got plenty of time to go and come back before my plane leaves.

You should go, I say. I can't swim, so I better not.

She laughs. Fair enough. Apparently, it's all runoff from the nuclear power plant anyway.

We talk about movies and shows for a while, and I tell Dana about the hijacking movie where the guy kisses his own knee. She makes me pull up the scene on my phone. We watch it together, our bodies hunched close over the little screen. She squeals with laughter like she's inhaled a balloon. It didn't occur to me before that the scene is funny. I laugh too. Suddenly I can laugh at everything, at all the things that were too humiliating or sacred to laugh at before now.

I ask Dana how she first got interested in cyber ethnography.

I've always been a bit of an internet weirdo, she says. Facebook and YouTube and Twitter all launched right when I was starting college, and that was just my life for a while. My roommates would go to parties, and I would be in my dorm room watching Taliban training videos and trolling people on Yahoo! Answers. I was just a bitter, lonely eighteen-year-old, you know, and Web 2.0 came at the perfect time for me. I wasn't exactly thriving, but I was alive. Then I stumbled into an anthropology class and read Laura Nader for the first time, and I realized that anthropologists get to study literally whatever they want. And I was like, okay. I can make this work.

We order more beers, and Dana explains to me who Laura Nader is and how the field of cultural anthropology went from the study of hunter-gatherer tribes to the study of Wall Street brokerage firms to the study of r/Incels.

Honestly, I can't understand why you'd want to do research in any other field, she says. The internet has become such a weird place. It's so fucking freaky. It's like the bottom of the ocean, you know what I mean? Most people can't even fathom one percent of what's going on down there. The rate that things are evolving, every year the entire ecosystem has just changed completely. There's nothing else like it. Tentacle porn and live-streamed suicide, this is all small potatoes, this is just the beginning. And meanwhile, on the surface, people are acting like you can still read books and watch movies and go to bars and hook up like the logic of the 20th century still stands, like the world didn't change forever. I don't want to ignore what's happening. People act like what we do online isn't life, like it's not the real world, but it is.

Dana picks up her phone and waves it in front of my face. This is reality, she says. This is just as real as any other lived experience. This is what most people are looking at most of the time. We can pretend that's not how we're living our lives, or we can own it.

Dana's phone says it's 9:55. It should be dark, but sunshine is still falling through the skylight in cold needles. The sun has taken my side. It throws its weight against time, trying to hold back the clock and the arrival of the hour when Dana will board her plane and I will be alone again. I look around for some sign of evening, but there's nothing to suggest that it's become late, not even a lowering of the curtains or a dimming of artificial lights. No one looks tired. It might be noon. It might be 9:55 in the morning or anytime at all. I wonder if the birds that nest in the volcanic fields around this airport go to sleep now with the light of the Arctic sun in their eyes, or if they keep flying until December, until the long winter night.

Dana traces little infinities through the rings of condensation on the bar top.

Don't get me wrong, she says, the internet is a nasty, ugly place. A lot of my research is depressing as fuck. But sometimes you come across something that surprises you. Like, I hate to say it, like Endless Summer. I'm not saying it's good. I'm not saying it's healthy, but it's not the sort of thing I can just dismiss out of hand.

Dana tells me about a past Endless Summer member who roleplayed as a girl with cancer. The user, who Dana never managed to track down, posted under the name Ellie Barber and would regularly update the group on the development of her fibrosarcoma. During her various surgeries and chemotherapy treatments, her friends on Endless Summer would flood her comments and DMs with encouragement and support. They told her not to give up. They told her she was loved, that she was brave and strong and beautiful, and that they were with her in this fight. Ellie held on for as long as she could, posting every day from her hospital bed. Finally, one of her close friends announced to the group in a short, somber post that Ellie lost her battle with cancer, passing away at age 14.

That was three years ago, and the love for Ellie on Endless Summer has only grown over time. There have been a few copycats but none that were able to leave such a lasting impression on the community. Ellie's friends still post on her page every year on her birthday and the anniversary of her death. Dana shows me a recent post on Ellie's page. It comes with a picture of an AI girl with red hair standing alone in a grassy field. The unnatural emptiness that surrounds her is so enormous that she might as well be floating in starless space. We read in silence.

June 26, 2024. Emily Rose Webber, age 17 (Scott C., age 63) at Ellie Barber, age 14 (unknown member): hi Ellie its Emmie I just wanted to say hi and let u know I miss u so much and another angle arrived in heaven the other day her name is Becca just keep a eye on her k I miss u every time at this time i dont know if u know how much I love u but I do I really do i am still have bad dreams wish they would be good ones I am still so sad i feel like all never stop missing you and all never get over this but any way just wanted to say I love u and I miss u

Dana wipes her hands across her face. I think she might be trying not to cry.

Am I crazy? she says. Is this just completely fucked up?

You're not crazy, I say. I want to touch her. I want to press my thumb into her cheekbone until the tears leak out.

I feel like this is something, she says. Right? I mean, there's something ecstatically true in this. They're trying, they're really earnestly trying to reach for something. Don't you think? Like, I know none of these girls exist, but I can't help feeling that somewhere, on the other side of this, there's someone whose heart is really broken. There's something that can never be made right.

Dana is giving me a new species of smile that contains endless possibilities. She's waiting for me to show myself. She's uncovered something secret and sparkling and infinitely dear, and now it's my turn to do the same. I just need to give her something, anything, one tiny piece of me to love. But I have nothing, no life in me at all. The silence expands around us. Dana's smile starts to wilt. If I could just say something. It wouldn't have to be brilliant, just a comment or a joke. But I can't think of anything. When I turn into myself to look for words, all I see are the vast distances of an invulnerable, unchanging void. There's nothing I can say, no lie big enough to match this.

Dana's disappointment is apparent, but she's still kind. We pay our bills, and she tells me she's going to find her dark corner of the airport to watch those car crash videos. We shake hands. I go to my own dark corner and fall asleep for a while. I don't dream, but in my sleep, I hear the voice of a child whispering in my ear. I wake up, and there's no one around.

If I'd said the right thing, she would've kissed me. At some point during the evening, I'm sure of it, we would've kissed. But I think we were playing for stakes much higher than a kiss, higher than sex, higher than love even. I missed it. I don't know what it was.

Sometimes I think God is punishing me. But punishing me for what? I don't remember what I did to deserve this. It seems that, in fairy tales, God likes to punish you by giving you what you want. That or He kills you in some painful and humiliating way. Since I'm not quite dead, I suppose I must've wanted this. Before coming to the airport, I must've wanted things to move without moving, to change without changing. I must've wanted to be alone, and to get far away from wherever I was. Would it help to want something different, the opposite of this, to

show I've learned my lesson? Or would it only incur a new kind of torment. Somehow even this seems too good to hope for. Maybe the lesson of every punishment is to not want things.

A little before three, I go to Dana's gate, thinking I might see her one more time. I try to keep a respectful distance, but she catches sight of me. She gives a wave. I wave back, and she steps out of the boarding line. She does a little shuffle on her way over to me, drawing out the awkward seconds when we're still too far away to speak. We shake hands again. She says it was a pleasure getting to know me. I thank her for saving my life. This makes her laugh, a small consolation.

Look me up when you get to Toronto, she says. We'll get a drink. You can meet my colleague. You'll like him. He's a weird fucking guy.

With a flash of certainty, I understand that she and this colleague are in love. They're going to get married and have beautiful bilingual children, and they'll be happy and sad and lonely together for a lifetime. If she remembers me at all, it will be as a footnote to this near-death experience, a footnote which will be left out when she tells the story at the anthropology department barbeque.

Dana disappears down the jet bridge. I watch her plane taxi away, around the corner, gone. The marshaller is left alone on the tarmac, wands hanging from hands, looking sheepish and small in this enormous absence. The sun has set, but only just. It hides behind the mountains, shooting its rays of light into a weak yellow sky. In an hour it will be up again, and this endless day will keep going.

I trade my ticket to Toronto for a new one to Madrid. The seat is uncomfortable and the legroom's bad, but that doesn't stop me from sleeping the whole way there and all the way to Mexico City too. When we land after the flight across the Atlantic, which seemed to last only a few seconds, I find a capsule hotel in the terminal and pay for a shower. I undress in my private room, turn on the water, and step in. At first, it's too hot, making my skin swell and blush, but after a few minutes my body seems to dissolve in the flow. I don't feel hot anymore. I don't feel that I exist at all. The only sound I can hear is water striking tile, the rush of static from a radio receiving the silence of the universe. The world hasn't been made yet in this bright cloud of steam. There's no solid ground, just endless gaseous space. There's nothing confusing about this, nothing that needs explaining. The airport is gone. The city, the country, the Earth, gone. It was too much for all of it to come together out of nothing.

That makes sense.

There's a knock at the door. A lump of rock in the darkness. A voice calls to me. It says my time is up. I need to vacate the room so it can be cleaned for the other customers. It's such a simple lie, but effective, potent enough to drag the universe back into existence. Just a minute, I say. Now I'm a part of it too.

I dress and step outside into the glittering substance of duty free. In a bottle shop, I see two women walking arm in arm down the aisles. They're exactly the same height, exactly the same age. The one with lighter hair is blind, guided by the one with darker hair. The word I want to use to describe their relationship is not friends, not partners, but companions. Something about them feels old-fashioned. It's easy to imagine them walking down a busy 19th century High Street, parasols over their shoulders, deftly dodging carriages and trollies. Their closeness is effortless. The dark-haired woman moves her companion around the shop with small gestures.

Every touch is both helpful and affectionate. It's the sort of ease that's only possible between people who've known each other for a long time. I decide that they live together and that they're rich. There's a sense of perfect equality between them. The blind woman could afford a caretaker, the dark-haired woman doesn't need to be doing this, but for the two of them the arrangement is perfect. There's no sense of obligation, no sense of reliance. They're happy together. The dark-haired woman pulls a bottle off the shelf and reads out the label. She makes a remark which makes them both laugh and cling closer to each other. The blind woman looks straight ahead, blinking away a thick paste that gathers on her eyes.

If I don't talk to them, I'll die.

I position myself at the end of the aisle. When they come in range, I'll say something about the wine. I'll say something characteristically American and self-deprecating, and they'll laugh. They speak Spanish to each other, but they'll speak English with me. They're getting closer now. My legs feel cold and shaky. The blind woman is telling a story, and the dark-haired woman listens and makes critical comments, her eyes still scanning the labels. I pull a bottle off the shelf and pretend to read it. They cross behind me. I can smell their perfumes, powerful scents attached to memories I don't have. I watch them go by, maneuvering around me as though I'm a post, a senseless object. Yes. That's right.

I contemplate the possibility of stripping off my clothes, pouring this bottle over my head, and chasing after them, screaming, none of this is real. It makes me feel better just to know that I could do it. It would require only a few simple gestures and motions similar to those that I execute on a routine basis. Physically, it would be easy, but to really do it, how would it feel? How does it feel to become a terror? How does it feel to give in to an act of pure chaos? Do you know you've gone mad, or do you feel, finally and for the first time, truly sane in a world made

of madness? Are you full of righteous anger at all the evil and at the same time undying love for all the good, which is dead, and dead means gone forever? Do you know, in your moment of rage and love, that you're leaving, that they'll never let you back into the wicked world?

I put the bottle back on the shelf and step outside the shop. I watch the blind woman and her companion walk off into the terminal, in a world of their own, unassailable.

CM 141 to Panama City. We fly through the night over a country of black rainclouds. The moon is somewhere below, between the clouds and the ground. Stars cower and shrink into a damp sky. Now and then a feeble bolt of lightning tries to press through the clouds, but it quickly flickers out.

The young man on my right is awake. I make a few attempts at conversation, but he returns only polite smiles. I don't think he speaks English. He's reading a thick book with yellowed pages, a completely different species from the pale, lifeless paperbacks on sale in the airport shops. When he opens the book, it releases an odor like rich old tree bark. It's a heavy book, more than a thousand pages. He lays it open across his lap, reading with his head turned down at a painful angle.

I watch a movie about a man wandering alone through the desert. At the beginning, the camera crouches beside the man in the dust. We follow him for miles, jostling over the uneven ground. Sometimes we trip and fall behind, and we have to run to catch up with him. Eventually, we get tired of suffering. We pull away, floating higher and higher to take in a view of interlacing canyons and cliff faces laminated in the colors of the past. The landscape is suddenly beautiful. We're safe in the sky from the heat and the vipers and the jagged rocks, able to admire from a critical distance the stark beauty of this dead planet. We circle around the solitary human figure below. He no longer seems to be struggling quite so much, which is good, because we're bound by a professional code not to interfere.

The cabin lights turn on. A minute later, they fade away again. A flight attendant speaks over the intercom in Spanish. Across the aisle, a woman gets up and moves purposefully toward the front of the plane. I turn to my seatmate and give him a questioning look. He stares ahead, his book forgotten.

What are they saying? I ask.

They're asking if there's a doctor on board. He says this gravely, as though quoting from an ancient text. He speaks perfect English.

Oh wow, I say. I hope everyone's alright.

The man shakes his head. I'm afraid that someone has passed on, he says.

How do you know? I ask.

Under the glow of the reading light, the young man's face is illuminated except for his eyes. His eyes are sunken deep into his head, swimming with thoughts.

I'll tell you if you want, he says. It won't put you in any more danger than you're already in. But I should warn you, if I tell you this, you may regret it.

I say that of course I want to know, and the young man, whose name is Omar, tells me the sad story of his life.

Omar saw his first corpse when he was seven years old, a beggar curled up in an alleyway in the Coyoacan district. His mother told him the man was only sleeping, and they walked on without stopping, but Omar knew. He never forgot the man's sightless eyes and the puddle of urine drying in the late-summer sun. After that it was the dwarf-like man in the department store, filling his basket to the brim with girls' underwear. Omar watched him get run over by a horse trailer on the street outside. Then there was the old neighbor woman who fell down in her garden. He found her lying in a patch of bare earth, clutching a bouquet of thistles and dandelions. Instead of calling for help she no longer needed, she'd spent her last living minutes pulling weeds.

From then on, Omar saw a dead person at least once a year. Suicides and murders, heart attacks and aneurysms, these deaths lived in his memory like signposts along the road to

manhood. For a while it seemed that there was nothing unusual about this. Death is a part of life, his mother would say. Eventually he found out that none of his friends had experiences like his. They lived in a wealthy neighborhood in Mexico City, in a community of intellectuals and artists. For the other children, death stayed far away in the hospital. It took only the old people and only when they were sure they were ready to go. Omar gradually became convinced that he was cursed. His mother wouldn't listen to him. She was an atheist. She said he was merely unlucky, and he should try harder to mind his own business and not nose his way into other people's tragedies. When Omar was fifteen, she was struck by lightning while performing The Trojan Women on an outdoor stage.

After starting university, death came to Omar more and more frequently. A girl he was picking up for a dance was found dead in her dormitory after a sudden attack of meningitis. His philosophy professor passed out on the toilet. He fell on his face, and his nasal bone shot halfway through his brain. There was the fraternity brother, drowned off the coast of Playa del Carmen, and the captain of the UNAM football team, stabbed in the neck with a piece of rusty wire. There was Omar's lab partner, who jumped from the north tower of the central library where the physics students dropped pumpkins for crowds of schoolchildren every year on Dia De Los Muertos in a reenactment of Galileo's Leaning Tower of Pisa experiment. Omar had attended this event annually with his mother as a child. Until that day when he found his classmate's body at the bottom the north tower in the shadow of the great mural with its sun and moon, its Aztec symbols of life and death, Omar never understood why the pumpkin drop had made him feel so battered as a child, why the sight of the bright orange flesh and guts splattered on the concrete had made the other children laugh while it made him cry.

After this, Omar went to Tepito to see a fortune teller. She told him that an evil spirit had been attached to him since birth, a servant of the Lord of Death called El Búho. She said that the spirit was irrevocably tied to Omar's life force. As he grew older and stronger, so too would El Búho. The dark spirit would become more and more powerful. It would continue to wrap its black wings around the people he came in contact with for as long as he lived. Omar asked the old woman what he could do to break this curse. She gave him a vial of poison. She sent him away and warned that if he ever came back to her house, she would order her sons to shoot him.

Omar spent a week alone in his room with the witch's poison. Many times, he was able to bring the bottle to his lips, but he could never make himself drink. He was too afraid. His dreams were filled with rivers of blood and jaguars with flaming eyes. The land of death, a place which he'd inadvertently sent so many souls, was terrifying to him.

You'd think I'd be used to the idea by now, Omar says. I've seen so much death, I shouldn't be so afraid of it. But it's just the opposite. I know death better than anyone, and I fear it the most. Death is the worst thing. It should be avoided at all costs. Even the most unspeakable torture is preferable to it.

Omar tells me about his plan. He's on his way to a tiny island off the coast of Panama which he's purchased with his considerable inheritance. He intends to live there for the rest of his life. He has an arrangement with a tour guide in Boca Chica who's been hired to take him out to the island in his boat and drop off supplies every two weeks. Omar's lawyer will deposit 300 USD in the man's bank account every month for the rest of his life in return for these services.

I can only hope that this poor soul on our airplane will be the last one, Omar says, and that my exile will allow all the people I know who still survive to live out the remainder of their lives in peace.

Omar asks for a favor. He doesn't dare go himself, but he wants to know if I'd be willing to walk to the front of the plane and tell him what I see. I agree, and he stands up to let me out.

In business class there's a big man with his shirt half unbuttoned. His skin is red and damp with sweat. He has an unhealthy face belonging to a man who loves to drink and eat red meat, but he's far from dead. He's watching a movie, one earbud in, the other dangling around his neck. Nearby, the flight attendants are having a hushed conversation in Spanish with the apparent doctor-on-board. I stand in the aisle for a few seconds, then turn to address the man.

Esta bien? I say.

Muy bien, says the man, who turns out to be an American tourist. Just a little heartburn, he says. Can't believe I caused all this fuss. You know they were talking about landing the plane? I told them they were being ridiculous. It's my own fault for eating all those damn street tacos. But this happens to me from time to time. I get the worst goddamn indigestion. I feel like I'm gonna have a heart attack, nope, just a fart.

I wish the man good luck and return to my seat. I give Omar the good news.

False alarm, I say. There's a man having some stomach issues, but he seems fine.

Omar listens, smiling sadly. Good, he says. That's good.

I can see in the depths of his dark eyes that he thinks, no, he *knows* I'm lying. He knows I'm only trying to spare him the guilt of another death on his already heavy soul, another death to haunt him while he's sheltering from the rain in his shack on his little island.

Omar returns to his book. Somehow, I can't muster up any interest in my movie anymore. I look out the window. There's another plane flying alongside us, very nearby and just a little below, a shadow pinned between red and green lights. It maintains a constant speed, never falling behind or pulling ahead. It's been there this whole time.

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In the central terminal of the Tocumen International Airport there's an iron statue of a winged man falling to his death. His wings seem to be coming apart. Black feathers stream behind him in a flurry. He's depicted falling headfirst, an expression of comic terror frozen on his face, eyes bulging, tongue sticking out between gunmetal teeth. *El Aviador* is the title on his pedestal. Below this is a dedication in Spanish to the men and women who lost their lives in the pursuit of flight, or that's what I assume. On the wall nearby a screen is playing a memorial film. Black and white portraits of pilots and aircraft inventors appear on the screen, framed between the years of their birth and death. The pictures fade away and are replaced by the footage from their catastrophic crashes. Canvas wings flap pointlessly in the air as a doomed man pedals for his life. A balloon catches fire, and the pilot leaps from the burning basket, falling hundreds of feet to the ground. A primitive biplane, flying upside-down, crashes into a tree, the only tree for miles and miles.

A group of children stand around watching the show. The carnage delights them. They explode with laughter every time an ill-conceived flying machine crumbles in the air or is smashed to bits at the bottom of a ravine. In fairness, it does seem like an odd tribute to the early pioneers of flight. A prodigiously mustached man stands at the top of a tower with huge bat wings strapped to his arms. He puts a toe on the ledge and peers over. For forty seconds he hesitates, shifting his weight back and forth. The children are beside themselves with anticipation. They cling on each other, staring open-mouthed. In Spanish, they say, Wait, wait, wait! Here it comes! He's about to do it! The man steps off the ledge and plummets like a stone. The children applaud and jump up and down, laughing uncontrollably.

I know I should be appalled, but I can't help imagining what Dana would think of all this. I think she'd be delighted by the absurdity of the memorial and the callousness of the children. If she was here with me now, she'd stand off to the side and watch the children watching. She'd be reminded of some anecdote from her life, and she'd whisper gleefully in my ear. We'd giggle like the children but from a place of deeper understanding and even deeper joy. How bizarre, she would say, how wonderful, how deranged, and also how perfect! It would make sense to Dana. It would fit somehow into the larger system of her understanding, and she would explain it to me.

Amelia Earhart's portrait fades onto the screen. She looks undaunted in her pilot's cap, confident but not too proud. The picture is replaced by a dramatic re-enactment of her crash. Her plane is seen for several seconds soaring bravely through the sky. Then, seemingly for no reason, the engines cough up black smoke, and the plane starts falling into the sea. In the cockpit, the actress who plays Earhart sobs hysterically. She waves her arms over her head, not even trying to regain control of the plane. One would think that Earhart had never been in a plane before, that she'd not even been aware of their existence. At the moment of engine failure, she seems to wake up out of infanthood into this adult body, finding herself plunging toward death in a strange metal vehicle. All she can think to do is scream. We cut away, and the plane crashes into the ocean, launching a glorious spray of water into the air. The children can't contain their elation. They squeal, double over, clutch their aching bellies. I'm laughing too now. I can't help myself. It feels so good to laugh at fear and death and all the awful things.

An old woman bursts into the group of children. She launches a sudden and brutal attack, shouting, smacking heads, twisting ears. The children scatter, fleeing onto escalators and moving walkways. The slowest, a boy of about seven, is caught by the old woman. She grabs a fistful of hair and starts ruthlessly boxing his ears. Her old arms jiggle with every blow. The boy yelps in

pain, but the harder he struggles, the harder she pulls, almost lifting him off the ground. In a stroke of inspiration, he reaches his little hands out toward me and cries, Papá! Papá! Ayúdame!

She lets him go. My son throws his arms around me, then cowers, using my body as a shield between himself and his attacker. The old woman turns her rage on me. She berates me in Spanish, poking my chest and shaking her fist in my face.

How dare you! she says, or something like this. How dare you allow your children to laugh at this sacred memorial! My husband was killed in an Air Force training exercise! His plane split in half like a party cracker! Do you think that's funny? Do you think dead airmen are funny? My husband was a hero! He was a noble man, like all the other pilots who gave their lives for the advancement of human flight! You wouldn't be here without these men! None of this would be here without them! They didn't die so you and your bastard son could come to my city and mock my husband's memory! Shame on you! Damn you and your son both to hell!

Lo siento, I say. Lo siento. It's the only thing I can say in Spanish that seems even remotely appropriate. The old woman throws up her hands in disgust. She stomps away, still muttering curses under her breath.

My son and I separate. We look at each other for the first time. He's surprisingly composed. He shakes his head disapprovingly in the old woman's direction, as though his mannerly sensibilities have been wounded more than his ears and scalp. He takes a step away from me, starting to withdraw.

I am sorry, he says in classroom English. I think you are my father.

Me? I say. A shiver travels from my spine into my cheeks. He says I am his father. He looks at me with such certainty, such familiarity. There's a smile on his girlish red lips. I don't know what to say. Could I have forgotten a thing like that? I shake my head, but I don't want to

deny it. I want to pick him up and swing him around. I want to say, There you are! Where've you been? I've been so worried about you! The flesh under my skin trembles. I'm ready now. I'll do it. I'll dive out of the sky into the puddle of my life.

Me? I say. I'm not your father?

The boy shakes his head, disappointed in me.

No, no, he says. But I *think* you are.

Then he dashes onto the busy walkway and is lost in the crowd.

By some mistake, my seat on my flight to São Paulo gets upgraded to first-class. It feels unnatural to sit down mere seconds after stepping onto the plane in a seat that's only a few rows back from the front. At first, I hold my backpack on my lap, nervous to take up first-class compartment space. I want to melt into my too-large seat, become a part of the upholstery so the economy passengers don't have to look at me as they shuffle past with their bags and their screaming children. Their harried faces communicate the same psychic message. You did nothing to deserve this. It's true of course, but my sense of guilt quickly ebbs in the face of overwhelming comfort. I settle in, put my bag away, and look around at the other first-class passengers. None of them raise their eyes past the phones and tablets in front of them. They're writing emails, returning calls, and doing other important things. It starts to make sense of me. We try a little harder in first-class, our concerns are a little deeper, and so it makes sense that our bottoms should sink a little deeper into our seats.

Lina is the last to board the plane. She's running late, but this doesn't worry her. She doesn't rush, as though she knows the plane can't leave without her. As soon as I see her appear in the doorway in her dark sunglasses and crimson headscarf, I know she will sit next to me and that she will have a lot to say. As predicted, she sits down on the aisle and pulls back the partition between our luxury seats. She gives me her hand to shake, smirking as though I've already done something charmingly indecorous. Her knobby hands are made all the knobbier by a cluster of rings on each finger. Introductions made, she removes her sunglasses and replaces them with another pair with thin gold frames. She takes her time, savoring the *clop* of the carrying case closing shut, a sound like a boot heel striking cobblestone.

So, what's a young cowboy like yourself doing so far south? she says. The cowboy is palpably ironic but somehow also flattering, teasing, and flirty. I pick a compliment out of this complexity and press on. I tell her that I'm just traveling, that I do a lot of traveling.

I wouldn't think so, she says. I can spot a world-traveler from a mile away. They don't even have to open their mouths, I can tell just by the skin. A well-traveled person will have dark, vibrant skin, and a healthy amount of wrinkles from all the sun and cigarettes. But your skin is quite pale, almost featureless. Not that that's a bad thing. Any 19th century European lady would kill to have your skin. But you don't look like the traveling type.

Oh, I say. Thank you. I don't know what to say.

Say nothing, dear, she says. I'm sure you're well-travelled in the northern countries. As always, I'm being too forthcoming. My friends say it's the Mediterranean blood, but I used to be quite timid when I was a girl. It's just age. Age will do it to you. When you get to be as old as me, you'll say exactly what you mean.

A stewardess comes around to ask for our drink orders. Lina orders a tomato juice, which amazes me. So that's what rich people drink. I would've never thought to order tomato juice. She takes a few quick sips without lowering the cup from her lips, as though she'd like to chug it but is too polite to do so.

Is that good? I ask.

Lina laughs. Is it good? It's tomato juice.

I don't think I've ever had tomato juice before, I say.

How funny. Well, the flavor's fine, but it's full of vitamin C and carotenoids. Do they not drink tomato juice in America?

I wouldn't know, I say.

You are American, are you not? Lina takes off her glasses and squints at me, as though there must be some problem with her lenses.

Well, yes, I say, but I haven't lived there in a long time.

I see, she says. And where do you live now?

Oh, all over, I say.

That's right, she says. You're a world traveler. Well, good for you for getting out. I could never live in America. I'm much too susceptible to stupidity. Some people can tolerate enormous amounts of stupidity, but not me. I'm a sponge, I just soak up everything I see and hear. That's why I have to surround myself with beautiful, intelligent people. I think I would be an intensely stupid person if I lived in America.

Lina puts her glasses back on and takes a few more sips of her tomato juice.

My first husband was born in America, she says. When I met him, he'd been living in Beirut for a number of years, but he was never able to escape his Americanness. Americans get very confused when they leave America, because the world is very different from what they're used to. For instance, Americans love violence. This alone isn't so strange, most nationalities do, but they love it in spite of its ugliness. They love it because of what it can do for them, what it can give them. On the other hand, Americans feel that violence is an end in itself. They actually feel that violence is good and beautiful. They think that bombs are beautiful and guns are beautiful, that a punch in the teeth is beautiful. Americans love to hit. They feel that hitting *is* love, that it's the only way one can adequately express the content of their love. My first husband was normally a gentle person, but in bed all he wanted to do was hit. My poor bottom would get so raw it seemed there was barely any skin left. I'd have to hold his wrists and scold him, very sternly, like a child. No hitting! I'd say. We don't hit! But telling him not to hit was like telling

him not to love, and he'd get so frustrated that eventually I'd have to give in. Alright, go ahead, I'd say. Just not so *hard.*

The plane is taking off now. Lina stares straight ahead with apparent concentration until we bank and turn south. Once the cabin stops shaking, she reaches across the partition and touches my sleeve.

Here I go again, she says, spilling my guts. He was a decent man, after all, and I know Americans are not all the same. Like, you. You seem to have escaped mostly unscathed. Yes?

I don't know, I say. I hope so.

I haven't offended you, have I, dear?

No, not at all, I say.

Good, she says. And what made you decide to leave?

What's that?

You said you lived in America. Why did you leave?

She isn't impatient with me, but there's an insistent look on her face which implies she's prepared to wait any amount of time for her answer.

I don't know, I say. I don't really remember. It was a long time ago.

Come now, she says. It couldn't have been *that* long ago. Look at yourself. You're just a baby.

I try to laugh. To be honest, I say, I don't know why I left. I don't think I meant to. It just happened. Now I've been away so long that I really don't think of myself as American. I barely think of myself as a person.

Trust me, dear, Lina says. You're more of an American than you think, and you're *much* more of a person.

I thank her, but somehow, I don't think she said this to be kind.

My second husband, Lina says, was a much better fit. He was romantic and had lots of money and power, in a noble way, in the way of good kings in fairytales. He was always doing thoughtful things. Like instead of sending the car to pick me up from the airport, he would go himself, and he would wait for me outside my gate with a bundle of roses. He was a very sweet man. But one day, I went to use the toilet in our house, and I found a turd floating in the bowl that he'd forgotten to flush. It gave me such a shock. You have to understand, he was an exceptionally clean and polite man. He never so much as belched in my presence. I wanted to believe that it was mine, my turd, or even that someone had broken into our house and used the toilet. But there was no mistaking it. It was his. And as I stared at it with amazement, I began to understand that *this* was my husband. The fine suits and roses, all the money and thoughtfulness, it was not really who he was. It was just a story that we'd agreed to believe in, together. My real husband was floating in the toilet water, turning slowly this way and that. I tried to forget what I'd seen, but it was already too late. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't return to the version of my husband that I'd known before. I'd seen who he really was, and ultimately it was not something I could love.

An oval of golden light crosses Lina's face as she turns to me and smiles.

You think I'm cruel, she says. It sounds cruel, doesn't it?

No, I don't think so, I say.

Then you must know what it means to fall out of love, she says. It's just as mysterious and heady as falling in love, yes? And we feel just as precious about its little artifacts. Don't you think?

Maybe, I say. Actually, I don't know. I'm not sure that I've ever fallen out of love. I sort of think I still love everyone.

Yes, dear, she says. I'm sure you do. You have a sweetheart?

Oh, no.

But you used to, yes? she says. And you will again, no doubt. You're a sweet boy. Pray you never get as old as I am, with no love left for anyone. My new marriage is the worst yet, but somehow, I can't even be bothered to be unhappy about it. When I'm not with my husband, like now, I feel he doesn't exist. I'm not exaggerating. I actually don't believe we'll ever see each other again. I always think that one of us will die before we get the chance. I'll be killed in an accident, or he'll have a stroke or something. He's getting old. Then of course I *do* see him again, but my disappointment is fleeting. I quickly surrender to his will, letting him use me like a hand puppet. I follow him around the house, around town, around his little work parties, and I say exactly what he wants me to say and behave exactly as he wants me to behave. All the while my soul just sleeps. It feels like I'm in a coma, like I've died. It's quite peaceful actually. Sometimes, I actually dread the day when he or I leave for a trip and I have to go back to being myself again. He'll go away, and I'll have to face myself like a naughty child who sleeps past noon. I hope you enjoyed your rest, I'll say to myself, but now we have work to do.

Lina looks at me for a long time through her gold-rimmed glasses, giving me a chance to respond. Her eyes needle and pry like a robin tugging at a worm. I want to say something so she'll stop looking at me, but I can't think of anything.

Isn't it strange? she says. Isn't it fantastic that at forty I broke off a marriage with a good man because I couldn't bear to live a lie, and now at sixty I won't break off my marriage with a man I genuinely dislike because I can't give up my lie? Isn't that fantastically strange?

I don't know, I say. Not really.

Why not? she says.

I don't know, I say. I guess I just believe you.

But why? she says. Why do you believe me?

I believe everything, I say. Every day I talk to people who tell me extraordinary things, and I believe them.

Yes, but why? she says. You believe them, you believe me. Why?

I'm starting to wish that I was back in economy, watching an action movie and eating pretzels. Is first-class always like this? Does Lina hate me, or can she just tell I don't belong? Her requirements are so specific and vague that it seems impossible to say the right thing. I think the best course of action would be to express polite disinterest, then maybe this interaction can come to an end, and we can spend the rest of the flight in comfortable solitude.

I really don't know, I say. I guess that's just the way I am.

Lina shakes her head. Yes, I suppose so, she says. You're a very good listener. I admire that about you. Most people don't like to listen, but you do, you're one of the few that do. You don't want to contradict or contribute, you just want to sit back and listen. But it's funny, I feel I could say anything, and it would all be the same to you. You don't really care what I say. I could say something completely implausible, and you'd believe me, because you don't really care. Do you see what I'm getting at? It's not so much that you're inclined to belief, but that you aren't really interested enough in the lives of others to disbelieve them. The words just wash over you, don't they, leaving you unaffected. Am I right?

My face is burning hot. I hate that Lina can see how hot and red my face is. The vent blows air between my eyes, alerting them to the possibility of tears.

I don't think that's fair, I say. I'm amazed that I can keep my voice steady enough to say even this.

Lina presses on. Why not? she says. What part isn't fair?

I shift in my seat, dislodging beads of sweat from my armpits. Well, let's just say you're right, and I don't care about other people. How am I supposed to care about someone who comes into my life for a few hours and then goes away? I meet people, I talk to them, I never see them again. All I get are the scraps of people's lives. It's not enough.

Yes, you make a good point, Lina says. I used to feel the same way when I was younger. Everyone except a few very close friends were unreal to me, like characters in a book. But then, one morning, I woke up, and all that changed. I turned on the radio, and they were playing this story about a flood that damaged a lot of houses but didn't kill anyone. They were interviewing one of the survivors, this man, this poor farmer. He was saying that while he was watching the water rising around him, thinking he was going to die, he was saying goodbye to everyone he knew. He was saying goodbye out loud, shouting over the roar of the water. Goodbye Hussan, goodbye Ayishah. Like that, he went down the list, all the people he'd ever met. Goodbye Fatima. Goodbye Hakeem. Goodbye Kamel. Goodbye Rasha. Goodbye Ahmad. Goodbye Yasmina. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, on and on for hours. I was crying listening to this, just sobbing my eyes out. What's the matter with you? I said to myself. Nothing happened. Nobody died. But it didn't matter. It was like a flip had switched inside me. Suddenly, I understood that it was real, all the broken hearts and dead mothers in all the families in all the countries that I'll never visit. It's all real, and I can feel it now.

I think Lina hates me. I can't understand why else she would be looking at me this way. It's not fair, I want to say. I didn't do anything wrong.

Do you believe that? she asks.

I don’t know, I say. I don’t know that I do.

Now we’re getting somewhere, she says.

I have some time to kill before my flight to Miami. I look for a corner of the airport that feels small, somewhere where the ceiling is not so high. I buy a bag of chocolates and sit down by a window looking out at a parking lot where a fleet of identical cars sit in rows like headstones. I watch a movie on my phone that takes place in the American South. All the neighborhoods have wide streets and big trees growing along the sidewalks, and it's a long way from the sidewalks to the front steps of the houses. The main character wears a cast, which is too bad, because, for me, when a character in a movie is wearing a cast, somehow I feel they don't count. I switch to a movie about space travel. At some point the astronaut gets cast off from her ship, and she floats untethered, spinning slowly end over end. She doesn't flail her arms or scream for help. We can't see her face behind her visor, but I imagine she looks annoyed, bored even. I think she would cross her arms if the suit allowed for that range of motion. She would tuck her fists under her arms, as if to say, Now *this* is going to take a while.

I watch a documentary about a man who builds dollhouses. He's a Hungarian immigrant living in his artist's studio in Manhattan. He has sparse white hair growing mainly over his ears and a cap he's constantly taking on and off. His clothes are wrinkled, covered in plaster and paint and sawdust. He looks like he hasn't showered in a week. Most of the documentary consists of footage of the messy studio and long unedited conversations with the dollhouse maker while he's scowling over a mold or a sander. The houses themselves are lovely and elaborate and so large that the artist has to stand on a stepstool to work on the upper stories. But my favorite part is the workbenches covered in little individually crafted bricks, little shutters, little gable brackets and corbels, little French doors, little shingles, little columns, little gargoyles and stone angels, little chimneys caps, little railings, little weathervanes, everything and anything you might like to see on a nice old European house, only small.

Why go to all the trouble of making a dollhouse like this? the filmmaker asks. Why spend so much time and effort making these detailed, handcrafted dollhouses, when a child would be just as happy playing with a plastic Barbie Dreamhouse?

The artist is painting windowsills. His glasses fog up from the warmth of his face.

I don't make houses for children, he says. Children already live in a diminutive world. It's adults who need to see their desires made puny and artificial.

So the bulk of your customer base is adults buying dollhouses for themselves? she says. How much do you charge for a finished dollhouse?

A lot, he says, shaping the tip of the brush with his fingers.

And what do they do with them, she says, these adults who've paid a lot of money for one of your dollhouses? Once they've brought them home, what do they do with them?

They live in them, he says.

When the film ends, I put away my phone. My brain has taken in all it can, and now it has to let something go. I stare out the window and try to have a thought about the parking lot or the rain that's started trickling down in thin, indifferent showers. I imagine seeing a person walking out there in the rain. Dana, maybe, though it's painful to imagine seeing her without being able to reach her. I wonder what the chances are that we might meet again in the airport. A billion to one, I suppose. Would I run into her in Toronto if I flew there now, or is the conference already over? Has she gone home to Montreal by now? I can't seem to keep track of the days since we parted. Maybe my best bet would be to wait for her in the Montreal airport. Only how long would I have to wait? It could be months or years before she flies again, and even then, I could miss her in the crowds of people. If we did see each other again, would she recognize me? Would she be happy to see me? What would I say to her? I try for a long time to come up with

something I would say, but I can't think of anything. How is it possible to want someone, to love them, but to have nothing to say to them? When I imagine seeing Dana again, I imagine her alone, the sound of her voice expressing thoughts and ideas and experiences to an empty room. I know I should put myself in that room too, but I don't want to. It doesn't seem possible. I'm not there. It would be like creating a person out of nothing.

I go to the food court and order a chicken parmesan. It tastes alright, but for some reason the last bite is foul, and I want to throw the whole thing up. I fight back waves of nausea, massaging my legs under the table. A young man in a monk's habit approaches me.

Do you have spare change, brother? he asks.

Opening my mouth feels perilous, but I risk a brief sorry-no. A burp follows, and it's instant relief. The monk presses his hands together, nods, and walks off. The gesture is oddly meaningful. I feel imbued with blessings. It occurs to me that I might've just missed an important opportunity. I call after him.

What's it for? I ask.

He turns around.

For, brother? he says.

I mean, are you raising money for something? I say.

Yes, he says. For a gyros and a slushie.

Oh, I say.

He smiles. His teeth are childishly small with large gaps between them.

You see, he says, I am going to be on a ten-hour flight, and I want to eat something first.

Yes, of course, I say. I'll buy you something to eat.

He presses his hands together again. Thank you, brother, he says.

The monk's name is Ingomar. We talk while we stand in line at the Greek counter.

They cook the gyros on a vertical spit, Ingomar explains to me. See how the juices run down the sides? You slice some off onto bread, then you add the tzatziki, and it is great because it has like heaps of yogurt in it. Delicious, brother, I am telling you.

Ingomar has crude features, as if someone shaped his face with a hammer. His hair is light and fluffy, and his eyes are black and sunken into his head. There's nothing particularly godly or serene about his appearance. He seems very young, no older than twenty, and he has similarly juvenile tastes. He orders a slushie at the counter and asks for all three flavors together, cola, blue raspberry, and green apple. He takes a test sip and nods approvingly.

We sit down at a table in the middle of the food court. Ingomar takes the first bite of his gyros and groans with satisfaction.

Delicious, he says. The meat is really sweet and spicy, and the yogurt is really sour. So, yeah, it is just really good.

So, I say, what monastery do you belong to? If you don't mind me asking.

Ingomar chews with his mouth open, staring at me uncomprehendingly. A yellow tomato seed has set up a perch on the side of his mouth.

Monastery? he says.

Oh, I say. I just mean, like what specific brotherhood are you a part of?

Ingomar shakes his head. Just the normal one, he says, and shrugs as though he doesn't understand the question.

I feel my cheeks go hot. There must be a lot I don't understand about monastic life if I've already managed to put my foot in my mouth. We sit in silence while Ingomar eats and shoots glances around the food court. I wonder if he wants me to leave.

The cola doesn't really go with the green apple, he says.

I see.

Yes, he says, but it is okay because they put the blue raspberry in the middle, and it goes well with both, actually.

Are you, I start to say, but I can't seem to find the rest of the question. What I mean to say is, how long have you been a monk for?

Pretty long, he says. He laughs as though this explains it all. A pretty long time, actually.

And, um, how did you arrive at your vocation?

I'm sorry? he says.

How did you decide you wanted to become a monk?

Ingomar thinks about this, taking another long drink from his slushie.

Well, he says, I don't know. I guess I just always knew I was a monk. Like how a gay person knows they are gay. You don't decide, you just are gay. Does that make sense?

I think so, I say.

I'm at a loss. Ingomar is chewing on his straw now, flattening it and forcing it between the gaps in his teeth. In my head, I run through a number of other questions I could ask him. What's it like being a monk? What do you do all day? Where do you sleep? How do you pray? Have you talked to God? What's God like? Nothing seems appropriate. I'm pretty sure Ingomar thinks I'm an idiot, a pleasant idiot, maybe, but an idiot. Normally I'd shrug it off. What do I care what a stranger thinks of me? But the possibility of getting closer to this person hovers like a command. What would it mean to really invest in this person, if only for a few minutes? What new form of connection would that yield? It makes sense to me that we could understand each other. In fact, I think we could have a lot in common. He could say, You know, it does get lonely

sometimes, sitting all alone in your room day after day. And I could say, Yes, I know exactly what you mean. And he could say, Sometimes I don't know if I'm talking to God or I'm talking to myself. And I could say, Have you ever considered that maybe it's the same thing?

Ingomar drops his straw on the table and sits up. He smacks his lips and tugs at his rope belt. He's going to leave any second now. I make one last attempt.

By the way, I say, what do you call that rope belt that you wear? I think I used to know the word for it, but I guess I forgot.

Look, Ingomar says. He produces the kindest, most earnest smile he can possibly give me. Thank you for the gyros, brother. I know that you are curious, but there is nothing I can tell you. Even if I wanted to, there is nothing I can say that will make you understand.

What? I say.

Now I better find my gate, he says. I like to arrive early, and it takes so long to get anywhere in this place.

Wait! I say. We're both standing now with the table between us. Why can't you tell me? Why wouldn't I understand? I think I *do* understand.

Ingomar shakes his head. No. I'm afraid that we can't understand anything of someone else's experiences. Not even two monks living in the same cloister. There is nothing we can say to each other. That is why so many of us are silent. But sometimes even silence says too much, and so I talk all the time. I talk a lot of rubbish. I talk all day about everything, but not about God, never God. No one can say anything about God.

Oh, I say.

But listen, brother, Ingomar says, already starting to step away. If you get hungry later, I really think that you should get one of these gyros for yourself. They are so juicy and delicious.

There is even a hint of lemon, and lemon is such a nice flavor to walk around with in your mouth. Thank you again, brother.

He puts his hands together and gives a parting nod, a gesture that is merely friendly. He walks away, and I'm left with his trash on the table. You would think that a monk, of all people, would throw away his trash.

My flight to Miami is almost empty, so empty that every traveler gets their own row. We exchange pleased glances when the voice on the intercom gives us permission to spread out. Knowing that we soon won't have to interact or share space with each other makes us friendly. We wait patiently as the travelers ahead of us settle down into their seats. We say, Here, let me help you with that, and lift each other's suitcases into the spacious overhead compartments. It's almost a shame we won't be sitting together. It would be nice to spend a little time with these kind people. I think we could be good friends. I've never been on a plane where the passengers had so much goodwill or were so generous to each other in their hearts.

As we're getting ready for take-off, the flight attendants establish themselves as the dominant social group in the cabin. They make banter and swap jokes back and forth over our heads, turning the safety instructions into a slapstick routine. We passengers smile at each other from across the aisles, feeling like underclassmen at a start-of-term party. Even the crew's efforts to include us only emphasize our separateness and the inaccessibility of their cool. Once in the air, the drink cart makes a brief trip up the aisle, and the brand name of every soda becomes a punchline. Then the flight attendants retire to the back of the plane. I look out the window and listen to the party gradually dying down, laughter replaced with giggles, giggles with whispers. After a slow decline, the remaining reverie is snuffed out all at once. Silence floods through the cabin like a curse. On a trip to the bathroom, I peek at the crew, finding them crumpled in their jump seats, heads bowed, each nursing dark, private thoughts.

I return to my row. I should try to fall asleep, but instead I write a letter to Dana in my head. It starts like this:

Dear Dana,

I miss you. Do you miss me? I've been thinking a lot about you lately, your tattoos, specifically. I see them sometimes when I close my eyes. All your bees and beetles. I think about the ones under your clothes, how many, where, what they might look like. They're like constellations for me, far away and full of meaning. Each one is proof of life, of something you felt or thought once. My skin feels empty since I met you. I have a dream that you hold me, and your tattoos bleed into my skin, stamping me with their mirror-image. Is that sad or beautiful? I don't know what I think. In fact, I never know what I think. I'm not like you, Dana. As hard as I try, I can never be like you. But I can hold you. Like a bowl holds water. I wish that was enough.

I run through this whole thing again in my head. I make a few edits, adding and embellishing more than anything else. I know it's awful, but it has to be awful. It has to be as awful and as tasteless as a letter can be. It would be mortifying to actually write it out and give it to her, but the letter isn't for Dana, it's for her soul. To have even the smallest chance of reaching a soul from so far away, you have to be crude, and you have to say too much.

I prepare to compose another dozen-or-so paragraphs, but I'm interrupted by a strange sight, something moving in the aisle. I think it might be an animal, though it's hard to tell in the dark. It looks like a monster, a rat king or some other conjunction of limbs and heads and tails. It grumbles faintly as it drags itself up the aisle with a voice that's oddly conversational, oddly human. I turn on my phone flashlight and see that it's not a monster but just an old, blind cat, horribly tangled in its harness. I get out of my seat and touch the cat lightly on the spine. He flinches under my hand but doesn't try to get away. It takes me a few minutes to extract him from the jumble of straps and buckles. He talks the whole time, cat-words which are sometimes excuses and sometimes complaints. His fur is not soft and smells sour. There are unsymmetrical slits in his face where eyes used to be.

Once he's free, I take him up and down the aisle looking for his owner. Is this your cat? I say. Sorry to wake you, but is this your cat? It turns out he belongs to Max, a woman in her mid-thirties sitting a few rows ahead of me. The cat's name is Germany. She invites me to sit with them. Max sits on the window, I sit on the aisle, and Germany sits between us grumbling as he gums soft treats. Max is embarrassed that Germany snuck away without her noticing, and she thanks me and apologizes endlessly.

He's always been an intrepid cat, she says. When he was a youngster, he would get up on the roof and climb all the trees in the neighborhood. He used to scare me so bad. Ever since the glaucoma I've had to be really careful with him. He still thinks he's a jungle cat. He still tries to climb up on the bookshelves. I'm worried he's going to hurt himself. His bones are so weak, I think a bad fall could kill him.

Germany is almost nineteen years old or ninety-four in cat years. Along with the glaucoma and brittle bones, Germany also has incontinence, diabetes, inflammatory bowel disease, kidney disease, heart murmur, feline asthma, and hyperthyroidism. He's on over a dozen medications and has to receive fluids intravenously.

I've had him since he was a tiny baby, Max says. And he's still my baby, even now. My blind old baby. We've been through everything together. It feels like yesterday he was just a kitten catching grasshoppers in the lawn. It doesn't seem that long ago. Somehow, he got old. You can tell just by looking at him that he's lived a long, full life. He's been a very happy kitty. He's killed lots of birds and lots of mice and had lots of fun with lots of pretty girl cats. But to me it just doesn't feel like that much time has passed. What was I doing in all the time it took him to grow up and live a life and get so old? I went to college, I worked a few jobs, but nothing

much really happened. I feel like I'm the same person as I was when I first met him. I'm a bit older, but I haven't changed. Not really.

Max scratches Germany behind the ears. The cat draws in his limbs and sits in a tight grey bundle, one lump for the body, another for the head. Germany is going to die soon. I can tell by the way he shivers and sinks into himself, his bones cutting through the flesh. It's suddenly so strange that we're here together in this moment, all of us temporarily alive.

Do you ever think about what life must be like for a pet? Max says. From the moment you're born you're taken care of by a being that's infinitely smarter than you, infinitely stronger than you. She's kind. She feeds you and protects you, but she's also all-powerful. She decides when you go out, when you eat, when you sleep. The years pass, you get old and sick, but she stays young and healthy. What does that feel like? Maybe you love her, but there must also be this sense of cosmic injustice. You feel your lifeforce fading away, and you know she's just going to keep on living. It must feel so unfair, don't you think?

I suppose so, I say.

Max nods. I think it's completely unfair.

I ask Max if I can hold Germany, and she says I can. I pick him up and put him in my lap. I think he's asleep, though it's impossible to know for sure when an eyeless cat is awake or asleep. His little body sinks against me, every muscle and tendon relaxed. I hold him close. I run my hands over the lumps on his back and feel his stomach filling with air and emptying again. He's such a precious old cat. I don't want him to die. I want him to keep living forever, even if I don't know he is.

The physical contact makes me feel so warm that for a few seconds I don't realize I'm wet. Then I think it must be me. I've pissed myself. But of course it's Germany, poor incontinent

Germany. Max snatches him away, apologizing frantically. It's okay, I say. I take fresh clothes out of my pack and go to the bathroom to change. In the back, the flight attendants are still sitting with their heads in their hands, their eyes black with despair. They look up and see the dark stain on my crotch and smell the sharp, acid piss.

Oh no, says one. Dude, says another. Another, the youngest, pinches her nose. Suddenly they explode with chatter, remembering their earlier euphoria. They laugh and joke at my expense. I can hear them revving up while I'm in the bathroom, their voices growing louder and louder by the second. I come out, leaving my piss-stained clothes deep at the bottom of the trash can. The crew surrounds me, unable to contain their happiness. They put their hands on my shoulders and slap my back and tussle my hair.

Hey, man, they say. Don't feel bad. Seriously. We're just kidding around. Really, it's fine. It's all good. You're doing good. You're perfect. You're a superstar. You're a champion, you know that? You're beautiful. You know that right? You're absolutely freaking gorgeous.

In Miami, there's a long taxi to the gate. We sit on the tarmac for half an hour. I stare out the window at the airport until it starts to look like an enormous grey sow flopped over on its side with all the docked airplanes suckling like piglets. Then the marshallers wave us in.

We're directed into a transfer screening. It's a puny checkpoint, just a few machines tucked behind a staircase. The woman in front of me is holding up the line. Her carry-on is an untied heavy-duty trash bag which she carries over her shoulder like a burglar. She sets it down on the floor, allowing no one to pass until she's found what she's looking for. Crouching, she tears through the bag, sending balled-up underwear and sandwich wrappers flying. The security agents plead with her to stop, please, ma'am, please stop, but she doesn't seem to speak English or Spanish or any other language they try to use against her. Her focus is a deep hole, and nothing reaches her. At last, she finds what she's been looking for, a tablet with a shattered screen. She holds it up over her head as though she expects applause, then she puts it in a grey bin. The trash bag goes on the conveyor belt, spitting a trail of wrinkled clothes behind it.

I come into the main terminal, so tired I can barely stand. The billboard screens are waiting to pull me in and wrap me up in their burning glow. I let them. Why not? I'm like a fawn in a nature show that allows itself to be taken by a wolf because it just can't resist. I submerge myself in ads for movies and perfume and sports betting apps and probiotic soda and ads that don't seem to be ads at all, that don't seem to be advertising anything in particular. The product is not the point, of course, buying is not the point. The point is to crawl inside and fall asleep in these colors and dream. In the dream, life vanishes. Life becomes a crude picture on the wall of the dream, and I don't have to look at it, I don't even have to know it's there. Sometimes I might glance at it, I might not, but if I do, I might think to myself, what a sad, ugly little thing, and pity only makes the dream brighter and more beautiful. Everything's easy in the dream. It's easy to

be right and brave and to go on a long journey. Goodness is easy, and time is easy. I take years by the fistful and let them pour through my fingers, it doesn't matter, there are so many of them. Faces of soaring light smile down at me, no, they don't smile, they just pour love straight into my heart. It's all true, isn't it, I say to them, it's all real, everything you promised. I knew it was. Where is it, by the way? Could you show me? I know I'm close. I'm closer than I've ever been.

An escalator comes down like the hand of God. I get on and start to ride up and up through so much light. Incredible, it never ends! It's like a joke if a joke wasn't supposed to be funny but only heartbreakingly lovely. After an age, the escalator spits me out at the Skytrain station. I imagine a Skytrain snaking its way through heaven on mist tracks, but it's just a normal train. They must call it that because it's in the airport, or because it's raised so high above the terminals. I push my way on and take a seat. I ride for hours and hours. It's amazing how bumpy it is compared to the airplanes. It seems the track is made of nothing but bumps. There are very few seats, and the other passengers have to stand and hold onto dangling handles. They hold onto each other, resting a cheek on a shoulder. Just one more flight, honey, they're saying, and then we're home. One more flight, and a short drive, and then we're home. They're so tired, and they'd like to have my seat, but I won't give it up. They ride all the way to their terminal, rocking and jostling against each other, and they never get to sit down. They glare at me enviously on their way out. He must be going further, they're thinking.

Then, when I feel like it, I get off. I descended the escalator, and there's my gate, right in front of me, and what do you know, I'm right on time.

In the airplane bathroom on the way to Detroit. I've always liked airplane bathrooms. I like that they're small. I've never been in one that was too small for me. I usually make a trip to the bathroom at least once every flight, even when I don't have to go. It's the only place where I can be really alone. You wouldn't think that I'd crave the feeling of being completely alone, but I do. There's a certain security about being in a small bathroom, because there's nothing to worry about. I fill almost the entire room with just my body. It's just me, just a toilet and a sink and a mirror which reflects only more me. There's no sitting around wondering when I'll have to pee next, how will I get to the bathroom then, will it be occupied, will the timing be right, how long will I have to wait. I'm already here, exactly where I need to be. It seems that life can finally begin, I can finally have all the thoughts I've been waiting to have, now that everything is accounted for.

As I pee, I lean a few inches forward and rest my head against the sloped ceiling. I can do this because I'm tall. I think it's good to be tall, though I know I didn't get a say in the matter. I think you might as well be tall, if you can only be one or the other. It's one less thing to worry about. Finished, I zip up my pants, but I don't go anywhere. I keep my head pressed into the ceiling, and I put my hands out on the wall on either side of me. Now I have five points of contact with the bathroom, feet, hands, head, and I feel stable. I feel like nothing can move me from this spot, not even if the plane were to roll in the air end over end. I press into my toes, my fingertips, forehead. The plastic surfaces of the room have just the slightest give, but they're strong, they hold me in place. My body feels heavy. I've fused myself to the room, I've become a part of it. I close my eyes.

Someone is knocking on the door. I wasn't asleep, though somehow I think that any amount of time could've passed between my last conscious thought and now. Someone is talking to me through the flimsy door. I can tell by the voice that it's a flight attendant.

Hello in there, she says. Is everything alright?

Yes, I say. I'm fine, thank you. I feel like I'm speaking in my own ear. I've never noticed how thin and high my voice is. It would've been better to have a deep voice, but oh well.

Okay, she says. Just press the call button if you need assistance.

She goes away. With some difficulty, I separate myself from the ceiling and walls. My hands are tingling. There's a big red splotch on my forehead, and it's smooth and warm to the touch. I look around the bathroom, taking stock of things. Since I'm going to be here a while, I think I might as well tidy up. I mop up the water splashed on the floor and on the edge of the sink. I pick up scraps of loose toilet paper and put them in the trash, and I press the trash into the bottom of the bag so the lid closes properly. There are smudges on the mirror. I wipe them off with a damp paper towel. I trim the jagged edges of the toilet paper rolls. Someone has written, Help! I'm stuck! on the wall under the ashtray, but there's nothing I can do about this. I put the toilet lid down and sit. It looks better in here now. It even smells better somehow. The air coming in through the vent is cold and sterile, almost chlorinated. I breathe deeply, letting my body swell out toward the edges of the little room.

The flight attendant is back.

Sir? she says. Are you still doing okay in there?

I don't want to talk to her. I wish she'd leave me alone. There are so many other bathrooms on this flight. I don't think it's unreasonable for me to have just one.

Yes, I say. Thank you.

Okay, she says. Are you feeling sick?

No, I say. No, I'm fine.

Okay, she says. Well. It's just that you've been in there a very long time, sir. More than an hour. Are you sure you're all right?

She wants me to say that I'll be out in a minute. She wants me to say, I'm so sorry, it's just that I'm nauseous, I've been throwing up. This is really embarrassing, but I have horrible diarrhea. She'd rather I say I'm shooting heroin than give no excuse at all.

Yes, I say. I'm all right. Thank you.

She goes away. She won't be gone long this time.

It's such a pleasant shape, this bathroom, the way it curls in on its user like a child's hand closed around a treasure. In here, I could be a piece of polished glass or an almond blossom or an iridescent beetle. The room wants me, only me. It wants me to stay. It's cold, but I don't feel cold, the way a rock deep underground doesn't feel the coldness of the earth. My throat tightens with the gradual awareness of contentment. The room is sufficient. It's perfect. I think I could be happy here. I could spend eternity between these close plastic walls. I'd never want to see another view or another face besides my own.

Sir, the flight attendant says. There are a lot of other people on the plane that need to use the bathroom. I need you to please hurry up.

Yes, I say. Okay.

Sir, the plane will be landing soon. You really need to return to your seat.

Yes, alright.

Sir.

I'm here.

Sir, what's going on in there? Is there someone else with you?

No, it's just me.

Okay, well what are you doing? Are you using the lavatory?

No.

Then you need to get out, she says. If you're not using the lavatory then you need to get out and return to your seat.

Okay, I say. But I don't move. I shut my eyes and lean against the curved wall. I press into the plastic, feeling the power of the room vibrating in my skin

Sir, I need you to get out now.

Okay.

Sir, it's a felony offense to disobey a direct command from a crew member. Do you understand? I need you to please get out right now.

Okay.

She goes away. I can already see how this will play out. She'll come back with another flight attendant, a man, possibly one of the pilots. They'll threaten me. They'll say they're going to have me arrested the minute the plane lands. But I won't budge. They'll have to land with me still in here, and even then I won't come out. They can bring police officers to bang on my door. They can send the president of the company if they want. It won't matter. Once a person has found the place where he belongs, no power in the world can move him. The plane will load up with new passengers and fly on to its next destination, and I'll be here. The plane will go in the hanger for maintenance, and I'll be here. They'll have to put a sign on the door. First it will say, Out of Order, but after a few months this will start to feel inaccurate, so they'll make a new one, laminated, and it will say, This lavatory belongs to Jason. That's the name I'll give them. I'll

become an airline legend, the anchorite in the Boeing 777 bathroom. Travelers will come on pilgrimages to see me. They'll pin pictures of saints and dead children on my door. They'll press their lips to the crack and whisper the great questions of the universe. Why were we created? Why do we only get to live just one time? Why does God fill people's hearts with such meanness and stupidity? But I won't have any answers for them. I don't know, I'll say. Please go away. Please leave me alone.

Sir, are you exposed?

What? I say. The flight attendant is back, still the same one.

Are you nude? she says.

No, I say. Of course not.

You're fully clothed?

Yes.

Okay, she says. Since you're refusing to come out on your own, I'm going to have to unlock the door.

There's a brief rattle of flaps and bolts, and the door folds open. The light changes when the door unlocks, drenching me in a miserable wash of blue. The flight attendant stands in the doorway. We stare at each other for a few seconds. She doesn't look the way I thought she would.

Return to your seat, she says.

She steps to the side to let me through. We don't say another word to each other. I feel betrayed, not by her of course, but by the room. I didn't know it could be unlocked from the outside.

I walk down the aisle and find my seat next to Hanna, an eighty-year-old Detroit local. Hanna's old even for eighty. She seems to have no eyes or mouth, just an enormous nose in the middle of her face sprouting long black hairs. She's travelling with her ten-year-old daughter, Marina. Marina is holding her own child in her lap, a chubby baby called Niko. She holds him up to the window and tries to make him look down at the city, coming rapidly nearer.

Look, Niko, she says. See all the little people? They look like ants. And the cars look like Hot Wheels, don't you think? Look there, way down there. That's our house. That's where you live. And me and Mimi and Tiger and Lady and Roland and Jacob and Bruce and Sylvie and Chester.

Niko's lip is trembling. Marina puts a finger under his soft little chin.

I had Marina when I was seventy, says Hanna, which makes me the oldest mother in the country. And Marina had Niko when she was nine, which makes her the youngest. Isn't that interesting?

Please, I say. Please stop. I can't bear it.

Toronto is so close at this point that it would be silly not to go. I can just take a little hopper across the lake. I know I'm too late, the conference is over, but I still want to go, just to be where she was. It's late when I arrive, and I walk around the airport taking in all the faces. I don't think I've ever paid so much attention to faces in my life. It's astounding to me how many faces there are and how every face is different from every other. Each one is attached to a different life. It seems impossible that we're all living and thinking things at once. It would make more sense to take turns, go one at a time. In the sleepy softness of night in Toronto, it's possible to feel that some of these people are beautiful, even important. But nowhere is there a face that's familiar to me. Nowhere is there a face I'm happy to see.

It's almost morning. The sky is starting to brighten, though the sun isn't up yet. I sit by a window and watch the planes come in. From a distance, they all look the same. They hang in the sky, paper white, delicate as straw wrappers. They don't seem like airplanes at all, not solid machines with wings and bodies and engines, but like souls who got lost on their way to Heaven. When I'm not looking, they slip through the cracks in the sky and find themselves flying in an airspace with no clouds above, no ground below. They float there forever, and they can never come down. All that returns to us are the jets, the noisy, stinking jets with their flashing lights and senseless passengers.

I've been awake now for as long as I can bear. I stretch out under the window and fall asleep. I dream that someone is leading me somewhere, but we never arrive, and the sun is enormous, covered in bright craters.

When I wake up, the day is already half over. I have a meal and make a few more laps through the airport. It's busier now that it's day, and there are too many faces to take in each one. It quickly becomes too much. I give up my search and find a place to sit down.

At a crowded gate, I watch a teenage boy with a portable gaming system gun down hundreds of virtual travelers in an airport security line. How shocking! I look around to see how the real travelers are receiving this. No one seems to notice what the boy is doing right under their noses. Maybe they just don't care. Without a glimmer of interest on his face, the young man continues to unload clip after clip from his machine gun into the crowd of unarmed people as they cower and beg for their lives and try to run away. I can't hear the screaming or the gunfire. There's only the faint clicking of the joysticks and buttons. Louder is the sound of the woman sitting next to me eating a bagel, poppyseeds falling into the paper wrappings like feeble rain. The longer I watch, the more ordinary it seems. Heads burst in perfect silence. Fire streams from the barrel of the gun. Somehow, I feel there's nothing frightening or surprising about this. It's like the girls doing headstands against the wall or the wasps throwing themselves at the window, trying to get inside.

I wonder what Dana would say about this. This would make sense to her, I think, and she would be able to explain it to me. For Dana, there are reasons for things, and the world can be understood. But I can't make sense of anything. Even the simplest things are obscure. Everything beautiful and ugly and good and evil is nonsense to me.

I get up and walk around some more. I know she isn't here, but she was, and that's enough. It's enough that I might find a trace of her. If I look hard enough, I might find her in my mind. I look for her coming off the plane from Keflavík, looking tired but determined, scanning ahead for the signs for customs. I want to see the thoughts in her eyes, the little necessary thoughts, holding back everything she can't feel right now. She moves quickly through the immigration line, flashing her Canadian passport. There's a ride already waiting for her in the loading area. She's timed it out perfectly. She'll make it to the conference on time, and all this

mess will be scrubbed clean by the excitement of the panels and discussions. The sliding doors burst open. The sounds and smells of the world flood her senses, traffic and seagulls and the crisp morning air blown in from Lake Ontario. A memory of family vacations comes to her from far away. She recalls the feeling that she had as a child at the end of every trip. It struck her always during the last stretch before home, the last hour of travel, a sense of utter desolation and disbelief. How could there be anything left of her life now, she thought, after everything she'd seen and done? There were no more flights, no more hotels, no trains and ferries and highways. The trip was over. Life, it seemed, was over. She could not go back home, not in her heart. Now I am truly alone, she remembers thinking. But the memory leaves her as quickly as it came. She hardens her resolve, stows her suitcase in the trunk of the car, and drives away.

I find somewhere to sit down and eat dinner. When I'm finished, I have desert, a slice of chocolate cake. It's delicious, rich and dark. I'm enjoying the cake, and as I enjoy it, I think about my enjoyment of it. What is my favorite part? I wonder. Where is the moment of peak enjoyment? Is it when I'm looking at the cake poised on my fork? Is it the initial bite? Is it the chewing, the swallowing? Is it the scouring the corners of my mouth for the remnants of sweetness? I think about all this while I eat, and when I'm finished, I look down at the empty plate smeared with frosting. All at once, I realize my existence is unbearable.

I follow signs for baggage claim until I come to a security hallway marked no reentry. Three sets of glass doors open and close for travelers as they walk through without stopping. They roll suitcases behind them or usher small children ahead of them. There's nothing interesting or dangerous about this for them. They pay no attention to the guard sitting in his chair off to the side. He's holding his phone between his knees, watching a dancing show on full volume. He lets thousands of people pass here every day without a glance. What makes me think he'll stop me? Why would these doors open for them but not for me?

I approach the hallway. My heart pounds in my ears. I pull off to the side, pretending to tie my shoe. The guard looks at me, and I shoot back up. There's a lump of panic in my throat. I have to speak to dislodge it.

Is this the way out? I ask.

Yep, he says.

Great, I say. I thought so.

He stares at me for another moment until his attention is pulled back to his phone. A contestant is flopping around on stage like she's having a seizure while the judges jeer and laugh.

He's distracted now. Now's your chance, just go! My legs feel numb, but somehow they manage to move in the direction of the hallway. The first door opens, and I step through. A robotic voice surrounds me.

Don't stop. Keep Moving.

It's all the encouragement I need. I reach the second door, almost running now.

Ne t'arrête pas. Continue d'avancer.

The third set of doors swing open, and I burst through. *Landside!* The air smells different here, fresher, wilder. I'm greeted by parking kiosks and information desks, racks of pamphlets

and maps and signs pointing the way to the exit, to the world. So this is what it feels like to arrive! But I don't dare stop and marvel. I slip into a current of passengers moving toward baggage claim. We walk quickly, without looking at each other, like a school of fish. No one seems particularly anxious or impressed. This is an inevitable part of the process for us. It's in the nature of a journey to end. There's a moment of stillness at the top of the escalators where I look down at the carousels and the rings of people waiting to collect their belongings. The sight makes me feel dizzy and a little nauseous. I steady myself on the rubber railing. I search myself. Is something's wrong? I touch my face. My hands and cheeks feel cold. But I'm all right. I'm just excited. It's just that I can see the exit. There it is, the big glass windows and automatic doors and, beyond, taillights lining up in the dark.

I'm all right. I can do this. I'm just going to walk outside and get in a cab. Why not? What's standing in my way? Stepping off the escalator, I feel surer of my footing. I feel that it's all settled now. It's done. I've figured it out. I feel pleasantly sympathetic for my past self and all my past confusions. It's like feeling bad for another person whose life has nothing to do with mine, whose problems are regrettable and irrelevant. Such a relief to be free of this, and so easily too! I sail past the travelers waiting for their luggage. I have nothing to wait for, nothing holding me back. I'll beat them to the taxis. I'll be driving out toward the city while they're still watching other people's bags going around and around. In the dark comfort of the back seat, I'll be feeling bad for these people still waiting to come home, still standing around on tired legs. I'll be hoping they find their way to a soft bed soon.

Here's the exit! I feel a squeeze in my gut. Just nerves, keep moving. Nothing will turn me back now. Time for the journey to end. Time to come back to the world. I'll find my life, I'll find Dana, I don't care how long I have to search for her. You don't give up on a love like this.

And when I find her, maybe in a warm, dark restaurant or in a campus courtyard with rose bushes stirring all around us, I'll say to her, Dana, I'm so, so, so, so, so, so sorry.

Just before the exit, off to the right, there's a trash can. I realize that I need it. I change course, start running, but it's too late. My stomach collapses, forcing everything out. I'm stumbling, vomiting. People jump out of the way. There are yelps of nervous laughter. I make it to the trash can and vomit some more onto the lid. Holding myself up on the sides of the can, I throw up all my dinner, the chocolate cake, everything in my stomach. Even when there's nothing left, I cough and spit and retch until I've pulled every muscle in my body.

Are you alright there? Gosh, you really don't look so good.

A man and a woman watch me from a safe distance away. The woman holds her hands out in a half-hearted reaching. The man's face is pale with worry.

Yes, I say, burping, barely able to turn my head.

Oh gosh, the woman says, you better sit down.

She touches my shoulder but quickly pulls away, motioning for me to come with her. I follow, stepping around the puddle of vomit. Everything burns from my anus to my throat. My legs are shaking. The man stands close in case he needs to catch me.

I sit down. My head seems to weigh a hundred pounds, and it takes all my strength to keep from crumpling and falling between my feet like a doll. The man and woman stand on either side, looking down at me.

Well, better out than in, the man says. The three of us laugh gratefully, as though no one had ever thought to put it this way before.

Do you think it was something you ate? he asks.

I don't know, I say. With effort, I turn to look at the man. He's pale, clean-shaven. He has small eyes positioned very close together. There's a strange emptiness to his face. I can't help but feel that something is missing, some essential feature, like a nose. But there it is, his nose, an unobtrusive nose in the middle of his face. Well then, it's got to be something else. There's definitely something missing. I think I could figure it out if I look hard enough.

Here, the woman says. Why don't we take a walk in the fresh air. That always helps me when I've got a bellyache.

No! I say. I leap to my feet. They both take a step back. I've startled them. No, I say, gentler this time. I'm feeling much better, actually. Thank you. I'm just going to run to the bathroom to clean up.

Okay, the woman says. Well, maybe let one of us go with you. You don't seem quite steady on your feet. Chris, go with him.

I start to walk toward the bathroom, away from the exit, away from the taxis lined up on the curb. Every step I take, I feel a little stronger. I'm still dizzy, but I won't fall. My feet catch me, and I gain speed. I feel like I'm running downhill. I hear the man behind me, struggling to keep up.

Take it easy, buddy, he says. What's the rush?

In the men's room, I wash the puke off my hands and face. I rinse out my mouth and spit in the sink. I accidentally catch a glimpse of my bloodshot eyes in the mirror. Oh look. There I am. It's awful, it's so outrageously awful, and it never ends.

The man tears off a few paper towels and hands them to me in a big clump.

I'm all right, I say, desperate to get rid of him. I'm all right now. Thank you.

You sure? he says.

Yes, thank you, I say. I try to smile. One more time, I look at this strangely empty face. I take note of the eyes and nose and the thin, pale mouth. It's all here, but it's not quite right. Something's not right. I can't bear to look at him. It's all so horribly wrong.

Okey-dokey, the man says. I'll give you some privacy then.

Once he's gone, I put myself in a stall and sit down on the toilet. I pull my shirt over my head so I don't have to see anything. I'm freezing. I pull my arms out of their sleeves and hold myself, skin on skin. I rub my hands over my shoulders, raising goosebumps, rocking back and forth. When I'm warm enough, I stop, and I feel I might never move again. I sit inside my shirt and wait to have a thought. I wait to want to do anything at all.

I've had some time to think about it, and I've decided that I just want to be alone from now on. It's time for me to stop all this flying around and finally commit to something. I would've liked to commit to another person, to someone I love, but I have no one. I have only myself and my solitude, so I'll commit to that. I won't fly to Paris or Tokyo or New York anymore and wander around in their terminals full of people. I'll find the most remote airport in the world, and I'll stay there forever. I'll bury myself in the clay on a runway in the jungle and wait out eternity. I'll split my soul into a thousand pieces and people my mind with thoughts. I'll give every itch and whim of me a name. I'll feed them and clothe them and love them, the sea monkeys of my mind. I'll be my own company. And together, alone, we'll come up with a wish strong enough to be wished a thousand times, strong because it is wished a thousand times. We'll wish it ceaselessly, long after the runway has been covered over by trees and vines. And when the jungle is gone, when the jaguars and the treefrogs are gone, we'll be wishing it still, screaming our wish in the face of God.

I've done some research, and it seems you can't just buy a ticket to a remote Amazonian airstrip. So instead, I find a little town on the northern coast of Alaska called St. George with a tiny airport the size of a packing shed. On Google Maps it appears as a dirt runway in an otherwise undisturbed expanse of scaly brown permafrost. The town is just a few unpaved blocks, the bright red roofs of a fire station, schoolhouse, post office, and church. It's not what I was picturing, but I think it might be even better. From what I can tell, there are no trees, not even snow this time of year. There's no telling how far the mind might be able to run in such a flat, featureless wasteland.

I fly to Chicago, and from there I board a plane to Anchorage. I have one seatmate, a woman in her fifties. She sits on the aisle with a buffer between us, nodding politely. I've already decided not to speak to her or anyone else on the plane. My mind is set on eternity.

We sit on the tarmac for a while, waiting for the runway to clear. I open the window shade and look outside at the ground crew making chalk art on the tarmac. They're drawing hopscotch courses and long, twisting dragons. The sun is shining, and they've dropped their layers, using bundled jackets as goalposts for a soccer game.

I turn to my seatmate. At least someone's having fun, I say.

It takes her a few seconds to realize I've spoken. She gives me an impossibly expressive smile that conveys both warmth and apology. She shakes her head, points to her ears, shrugs, and gives a grunting laugh.

Oh, no problem, I say.

Of course, it was a mistake to try to talk to her. I was lucky she couldn't hear me. I have to remember my mission. I shut my eyes. I'm not falling asleep, just sinking deep inside myself. It takes a moment after opening my eyes for me to understand that the men and women on the

tarmac are gone, and the tarmac is gone. I still expect to see the Chinese dragons somewhere below in the great void of air. Any moment now, the blue-tinted mountains will come close and become childish sketches, triangles with little squiggles of snow. But I look and look, and they stay far away, perhaps a mile down below, holding their glaciers between them. It's suddenly incomprehensible that the view could've changed so dramatically while I sat here doing nothing.

My seatmate, seeing that I'm awake, gives me a conspiratorial grin. From her purse, she takes out a pen and her plane ticket printed on a sheet of printer paper. She writes something down on the ticket and hands it to me.

Can you make a paper airplane? it says.

Yes, I say, and nod to make sure I'm understood.

The woman gives me another remarkably meaningful smile. She seems to have access to muscles in her face that lie slack and dormant in others. She gestures toward the ticket. What are you waiting for? she is saying.

I take down the tray table and lay the sheet out flat. It's somewhat wrinkled from its time in her purse, and I need to smooth it out before I can begin. I fold and unfold, careful to make sure both sides are symmetrical. I press my thumbnail into each new crease, carving out clean, straight lines. The woman watches, expressing great interest with just her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth. It comes out well, an elegant little plane with broad wings tapering to a point. I have to fight the urge to put it to my lips.

The woman takes the plane, holding it in two fingers. Her tongue between her teeth, she makes a left-handed lob, launching it up the aisle. We both sit up to watch the little plane glide. It makes a pretty arc in the air, turning heads as it goes. It flies for only a few yards, barely two seconds, then its wing grazes a seat rest, and it lands in the drink cart. The flight attendant is a

good sport. She picks it out of the Coke cans and throws it back in our direction. This time the plane makes a sharp dive and ends up in a lap. My seatmate jogs up the aisle to retrieve it, offering smiling apologies. When she returns, she unfolds the plane carefully and writes another note on it.

It says, Thanks! I always wanted to do that.

Happy to help, I say.

Now the sheet of paper sits unfolded on the tray table crisscrossed with lines that seem to have no purpose or function. Laid out like this, the creases offer the vague shape of a woman in a dress with thin hips and outstretched arms, as though she's waiting to be embraced. I feel that if I study the paper for long enough it might reveal some code or perhaps a new form of writing based on interconnecting triangles.

How did I know I could make a paper airplane? I can't remember when I learned how to do it, or when was the last time I did it. The knowledge must've come from some deep reservoir within me, yet it came instantly, I didn't have to go fishing for it. I just made the paper airplane. Somehow, I can't imagine ever not knowing how to make a paper airplane. There's no memory attached to this and no feeling. Still, I find myself thinking of childhood. My mind has nothing solid to land on here, no image or sound or smell, but it's still possible to think the word childhood and to let it envelop my thoughts like sky-blue wallpaper. It's so far away that it's almost close again. It comes back around the other side.

I let my mind return to St. George. I think about the little cargo plane that will take me there. I imagine I'll have to squeeze in between pallets of canned food and mail bags. In nearly every envelope there will be a handwritten letter. I think it will be awfully loud in the plane as we jostle over the Alaskan mountains. Netting will hang from the sides, a strange material,

perhaps a sort of canvas, though exceptionally tough. I'll weave my fingers through it and lean my head against the bare metal siding. I'll feel the vibration and understand that the sky is right there, just on the other side of this thin material. Already, I will think to myself, I'm closer to the world than I've ever been. Who knows what will happen to my mind in a place like St. George? Already the name holds so much power in my mind, a sound both ancient and eternal, desolate and free. I'll look out the window in my little airport hut and watch the light change from Arctic day to Arctic night. Centuries will pass like minutes. It will be a long time of doing nothing, a long time to think about all that's happened, and all that will never happen again.

Cody? Cody Bishop?

I spot the source of the voice standing under a decorative sea plane, a balding man in his early thirties with a beard, hoop earrings, and clear-framed glasses. He throws down a heavy backpack and runs at me.

I can't fucking believe this!

He grabs me, and my feet lift off the ground. I feel the scratch of his beard on my cheek, smell the tang of his shampoo. I'm being squeezed so tightly that my ribs stab into my guts and tears pour down my cheeks. He sets me down, and I stumble into him, burying my face briefly in his chest, a warm flannel shirt. He holds me away so he can look at me. I try to hide my face, cocking my head like a guilty dog. He'll realize his mistake now, and I'll slink away, roll myself up into a ball of limbs and torso and rotten head. But his eyes are red and glossy too. He holds me in place, not allowing me to pull away an inch. Wonder and surprise keep flashing across his face, as though he's just now realized how much we've meant to each other. He claps my cheek with a big, calloused hand and laughs.

This man, whose name is Devon, has mistaken me for someone else. But it's too late. I am Cody now.

We can barely get a word out with all the giggling and falling on each other and the sobs that burst out of me like a hacking cough. Devon retrieves his backpack, hanging it on one sturdy shoulder, me on the other. We start to move through the Anchorage airport, slowly, like we're walking in deep snow.

Why are you so nervous? he asks, holding me up under my armpits. It's only me, he says.

I know, I say, spitting tears. I'm sorry.

It's okay, he laughs. It's cute. Damn-it-all, I missed you.

I missed you too.

Let's get a drink, you basket case.

We find a bar decorated with antlers and elk heads and a stuffed polar bear roaring silently in the entryway. Devon deposits me in a corner booth.

Stay right here, he says. I'm getting beer.

He mops my tears with his hands.

Jesus Christ, he says. Don't melt. I'll just be a minute.

He comes back with a pitcher and two frosty glasses. He pours out the beer and raises a toast. I'm shaking. Beer sloshes onto the table. He puts a hand on my cup to steady it.

Breathe, man, he says. Just breathe.

I'm sorry, I say. I'm being silly. I'm just surprised to see you is all.

Me too, he says. It's okay. Just take your time. Take all the time you need.

We lock our legs together under the table and drink. Once the first glass is drained, I start to feel warm, and I calm down enough that we can have a conversation.

It seems Devon and I lived together in Eugene for a while after college. We lived in a big house in the Whiteaker with many friends and animals. There was Jo and Lucy and Simon, Devon's ex, and Lila, my ex, and always someone staying in a tent in the backyard. There was Lucy's bird and a pug named Monk and a cat called Tracy Chapman who we shared with the neighborhood. I can offer no details, so I try to make up for this with enthusiasm. The beer makes me feel inspired.

That cat loved you, I say. You were her favorite, you really were.

You always used to say that, says Devon. And I don't know why, because you and Tracy had the sweetest relationship. Like, she wouldn't cuddle with you because she respected you too

much, you know what I mean? The two of you fucking shared a soul or something. All that time you spent together, you with your books, Tracy stretched out in the sun. You had something really special with her.

I wonder if she's still alive, I say.

Oh, for sure, Devon says.

Yeah, well, but she must be pretty old by now.

Maybe not. When did we move in? It was the year after graduation, so 2016, right? Eight years ago. So, she'd be, ten, eleven now? That's not so old for a cat.

No, you're right, I say. The other day I met a nineteen-year-old cat.

See, Tracy's got plenty of good years ahead of her. Do you still have that video of her singing Fast Car on Craig's balcony? I think about that video probably once a week.

He pissed on me, I say.

What?

Sorry, the cat, the nineteen-year-old cat. I was on a plane, and I was holding him in my lap, and he pissed on me, and then the flight attendants thought I'd pissed myself.

Jesus, man. That's the most Cody Bishop story I've ever heard.

Our pitcher is nearly empty, and Devon gets up to buy another. I don't think I've ever drunk so much at a sitting. The beer helps. So long as I don't stand up, I think I'll be fine. I can actually see my cheeks, red and round, swelling into sight. I press the cold glass to my face.

So, what the hell are you doing in Alaska? Devon asks. Are you travelling with someone?

No, I say, just me. I like travelling alone.

Oh, I know, Devon says. *That* I remember. So, what, you just felt the itch to go to Alaska and bought a ticket? Is that it?

Pretty much.

I thought Europe was more your style. Prague and Vienna and the like.

Well, you gotta switch it up every now and then, I suppose. But what about you? What are you doing up here?

Bagging summits, what else?

Of course, I say. Same old Devon.

Not Hunter this time. I'm getting too old for that shit. Just Denali.

Just Denali?

Yeah, *just* Denali, he laughs. A nice high-altitude stroll with some buddies. I barely even got to use my ice axes. That's a walk in my book.

See, this is why I could never keep up with you, I say.

Devon is silent for a few seconds. I'm afraid I've said the wrong thing. Maybe Cody's supposed to be intrepid like Devon, or even more so. Maybe he's just now noticed some small discrepancy in my face, my voice, but he's only swallowing a burp.

You never *tried* to keep up with me, he teases. You'd come to the climbing gym with me and Simon and just sit on the mat the whole time.

Then he reaches across the table and takes my hand, as though to affirm that all this is in the past and the memory of fights can't hurt us anymore.

Because I wasn't good at it, I say. I wasn't strong like you.

Devon bursts out laughing. He's holding both of my hands now, squeezing my legs between his. I can feel the meat of his thigh against my knee.

This is incredible, he says. Don't you remember this? We used to have this conversation all the time, remember? We'd come out into the Crux parking lot, you all sweaty and annoyed,

and you'd say, I'm not strong enough, I'm not strong like you guys, and I'd say, It's not about strength, it's about strategy, it's about geometry, it's about balancing your weight and keeping close to the wall and leveraging your body creatively. And you'd make us compare arms, and you'd go, Really? Really? You're telling me strength has nothing to do with it?

Devon rolls up his sleeves and lays our arms side by side on the table.

Look at me now, he says. Old and flabby, and I still make it to the climbing gym with Julian almost every day.

Devon's arms are thick and tan and strong as tree limbs. Mine are practically bone by comparison.

Julian? I say. It comes out as a question, but by the look on Devon's face I'm supposed to know who this is. I change course. How *is* Julian?

He's good. He's still sort of dealing with the fallout from his dad. It was really hard on him, but we're working through it. He's going back to school in the fall, actually. He's going to be a therapist. He wants to specialize in PTSD, can you believe that?

Wow, I say.

For some reason the idea of little Julian sitting in his big-boy-therapist's chair across from combat veterans and police officers is just hysterical to me, Devon says.

I only learned that he exists a few seconds ago, but I think I hate Julian. I picture him in his office, his shirt buttoned all the way up, his pouting lips, his crisp ironed pants.

Hey, Devon says, leaning across the table like he's about to ask an intimate question. Did you ever finish your book?

My book?

Come on, man. Don't play dumb. Your fucking book. Your book about Beethoven and his gay nephew.

I shake my head. No, no. I gave that up a long time ago.

Wow, Devon says. He's not disappointed but awed. This answer seems to impress him more than the alternative, even more than if I'd said I'd sold the book to a top-tier publishing house.

I can't believe that, he says. It was *so* good.

No, I say. It wasn't. You only thought it was because you didn't know any better.

Devon pretends to be offended.

Fuck you, it was good, he says. I still think about it all the time. The part where they go to the forest to pick wild blueberries. Oh man, and all the lessons. Your Beethoven was so lively, so cheerful, not just moody and grim. And the way you wrote about music and silences. The gulp of the piano pedals. I'll never forget that, the gulp of the pedals. What was the line? I'm deaf to my own music? No, we're *all* deaf to our own music. I love that.

I shrug. You remember more of it than I do, I say. I haven't thought about it in years.

That's a shame, he says. Maybe you'll go back to it someday.

We sit in silence for a moment. Devon drains the bubbles in the bottom of his glass.

I quit climbing, he says.

Fuck you, no you didn't, I say. You just climbed Denali.

Devon laughs. Yeah, but I think it was the last one. Or the last *big* one at least. I can't keep this up forever, you know? Time to get serious. Time to be a grown-up.

But you love climbing, I say.

Devon kneads his hands into his snow-burnt cheeks. He's smiling but his eyes have gone sad and blue, like he's looking down from a peak at something bright and unreachable.

Yeah, he says. I'm not so sure anymore. I know I *used* to love climbing. I mean, it's like the most perfectly fucking simple metaphor for anything you could ever want in life and how you're gonna get it, you know? Like, you want to get up there? You're gonna have to climb. It's that simple. Like, I used to fucking love all that because-it's-there George Mallory shit. When I was young, I used to climb mountains because it could be done. Now I climb mountains so it *will* be done. You know what I mean? Done as in finished, as in over and done with.

You don't mean that, I say.

I really do, he says, laughing. It amuses him to question his commitment to this lifelong passion. The more he digs at it, the happier it seems to make him.

It's like, do I enjoy climbing mountains, or do I enjoy *having* climbed them? he says. You always get a beer at the end of every climb, right. You come off the mountain, your toes touch snowless ground for the first time in days, and you and the gang pile into the van and stop at the first bar you come to. That first beer after coming off the mountain is always my favorite part of the trip. Without fail. It's not making it to the summit, frozen to my fucking guts, staring out at a bunch of pointless landscape. It's always the beer. And then it occurs to me, shit, I could drink beer at home. I could just go to a bar with my buddies and come home and sleep in my bed with my dog and my boyfriend.

Devon holds up his glass to demonstrate his point, but there's no beer left. There's no beer left in either pitcher. The realization makes him laugh.

I don't know what happened to my drive, he says. That instinct to climb used to be so strong in me. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world, to climb higher and higher and

higher. I couldn't imagine wanting anything else. But I'm older now, and my sense of urgency is just totally gone. Isn't that weird? You'd think it'd be the opposite. I have less time left and it means less to me. Isn't that stupid?

I lean across the table, reaching for his elbows, trying to comfort him. But he doesn't want comfort. His smile asks me to celebrate this with him, the end of hobbies and interests, the relief of all that being over.

Isn't it something? he says. All this time later, we meet again in fucking *Alaska* of all places, only to find that you've quit writing, and I've quit climbing. And it's years too late for any of it to make an ounce of difference.

Devon closes out our tab and we wander into the terminal to find his gate. Standing, I realize now how drunk I am. I have to lean on Devon to steady myself. He doesn't mind. Somehow, after drinking the lion's share of our two pitchers, he seems only a little rosy.

Devon is going back to Seattle where he lives with Julian and their dog. I'll do anything to stay with him a little longer, so I say I'm going to Seattle too. Maybe Devon is the kind of person who believes in improbable coincidences, or maybe he's just drunk, but he doesn't question me. I buy a ticket on his flight while he's not looking. We cling close to each other as we watch the storm outside, grounding all planes for at least the next few hours.

In his arms, the airport stops spinning. He holds me close and strokes my hair. I let my cheek melt on his shoulder. I close my eyes and listen to the storm, to his whistling breath. He's so solid, so substantial and warm that I'll die if he lets me go. I'll float through the ceiling and dissolve into the sky, still the weakest blue above the rainclouds.

Devon whispers in my ear. Life's been hard on you, hasn't it, he says. You wouldn't be able to tell by looking at you. I mean fuck, you don't look a day over twenty-five. You still look

like the bookish boy I met rock-hopping on the Willamette. My river baby. My little duckling. But I can feel it in you, now, the pain, when I hold you. I can feel how much you're hurting. And I don't know why, and you don't have to tell me, but it kills me to know you're hurting. I just want to make the hurting stop. I just want to help. Can I help?

We end up in the family restroom. It's horrible to be loved like this, once and never again. It's horrible to take love I don't deserve. His lips are chapped, but underneath they're soft and warm. His mustache hairs tickle my nose. He moves his lips across my face, my neck, chest, arms, hands, legs, crotch. Every kiss makes me tremble, and he holds me tightly, as though to keep me from shaking myself to pieces. He puts my penis in his mouth, and it's awful, immediate. I want to escape, to curl myself into an infinitely small point. Oh God! I say. Oh God! He bursts out laughing, the stuff dripping out of his mouth. He's laughing, but I can't laugh. I'm sobbing, hiding in my hands, trying to pull up my pants.

Oh, sweetheart, he says. You're embarrassed. Don't be embarrassed. This is nothing. He kisses me, but I don't want him to kiss me, not with all that stuff still smeared through his beard. I try to hold him back, but he's stronger than me. He pushes through and holds me, his teeth resting on my shoulder. Hey, hey, hey, he says. What's wrong? It's okay. It's alright, baby. Everything's alright. Angel. There's nothing wrong in the whole world, not one thing.

I don't understand. I don't know what this means.

He whispers in my ear,

Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody

and he says it so sweetly, this stupid, insipid name that belongs to someone else. I want him to stop calling me this, but there's nothing else he can call me, no other name that I could have and he would love me. So I let it fill me, this,

Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody Cody

becoming the sound and soul of love. He lifts me onto the sink. I wrap my limbs around him. We fit perfectly. It's familiar, as though we've embraced like this a hundred times already.

Do you want this? he asks. He puts his lips on my lips, using my mouth to form the words.

I want this, I say.

We have sex again in the sky between Anchorage and Seattle. It's better this time. In the airplane bathroom, I feel that we're on my turf now. We laugh at each other in the mirror, at the faces we make. I know now how Cody could've fallen in love with a man like Devon all those years ago, a man who understands strategy and geometry and knows how to keep himself close to the wall and leverage his body creatively. He's not as lean as he must've been once, but there's still so much power in him. Over and over again, I sink my fingers into the softness that surrounds him like I'm trying to press through the years that have kept us apart.

Later, in the back row of the airplane, I sit in his lap, leaning against the shuttered window. It's dark, and no one pays attention to us. I have one hand under his shirt. I comb my fingers through his springy hair. He has my other hand in both of his, and he explores the crisscrossing lines in my palm.

The feeling of being warm and held overwhelms me again. I start to cry. Tears roll into my ears.

What's wrong baby? he asks.

Nothing, I say. It's nothing. I just hate that you're with him.

I know, he says. I know. But I'm so happy that we found each other again. You know that, right? You know how happy it makes me to be with you again, if only for a day, don't you? I'm so glad I found you.

He puts my hand to his mouth. His lips travel up and down the hills and valleys of my knuckles. He sings, whispering, almost inaudible. January, February, March. April. May.

I wish it wasn't just a day, I say. I wish it was forever.

I know, he says. I know baby.

He touches the tears on my face, then my eyelids, one, and then the other, closing them. He wants me to sleep now so he can hold me and think. I try, but I can't. I keep feeling the plane moving underneath us, turbulence like a car going over potholes. If we were in a car, we might easily hit a tree or a barrier or a drunk driver, and all this could come to an end. But in the sky, there's nothing to collide with, nothing to keep us from soaring through the air mile after empty mile. I remember a poster I saw once in an airport bathroom. It was printed with facts about how safe air travel is, meant to put nervous flyers at ease. Plane crashes are so rare, it said, that you would have to fly 3.5 million times before you found yourself in a plane that went down.

If there's anyone who's come close to that figure, it would be me. If anyone has earned that 1-in-3.5-million-plane, it would be me. Let it be this one, I think. God, let it be this one.

We land in Seattle early in the morning. Devon answers a call from Julian while we sit on the tarmac. He looks into my eyes the whole time and strokes my hair.

I can't wait to go home with you, baby, he says. It's like he's saying it to me.

I stay with Devon for as long as I can, holding his hand as we make our way toward baggage claim. We don't say a word to each other. Neither of us have slept. My legs feel numb and unreal. I can't believe that he's about to leave and I'm never going to see him again. What is happening should just keep happening. That would make sense.

We come to the one-way hallway marked exit. The other passengers on the flight from Anchorage have already made it through. We're almost alone in the airport. Devon hugs me.

He's waiting out there for me, he says.

I start to cry again.

You know you can't come any farther. You know that, right, baby?

I know, I say.

You're incredible, baby, he says. You know that. There's so much life still left in you. So much love. You're going to do amazing things.

We kiss for the last time. He holds me away so he can study my face. Suddenly he frowns. A look of recognition or the opposite flashes in his eyes. He seems to be about to ask a question, but he changes his mind.

Friendly now, he says, It was so, *so* good to see you, Cody.

His fingers slide down my arms. He takes my hands, stepping away with them. He pulls them out as far they'll go, to the tips of my fingers. Then he lets go and walks off, still reaching. He turns around and makes his way down the hallway. I watch him pass through the three glass doors until he vanishes down an escalator. The last I see of him is his big grey backpack, all that gear going with him.

As soon as he's gone, I stop crying. A chill rushes into me. I'm shivering under my ribs, and I hold myself for warmth. I walk around looking for a store to buy a sweater or a blanket, but

nothing's open yet. The grates are all down, the shelves dark. The only airport employees around are the janitors and the baristas putting out coffees on the counter for pickup. I find a bench and lie down. I pull all my limbs together to keep from shaking.

Now they're hugging at the baggage carousel, I think to myself. Now they're getting in the car and driving to their apartment in the city. Now they're standing on the landing, fumbling with the keys. The dog is jumping at the door.

I'm too tired to sleep, so I take out my phone and put on a war movie, the kind that must begin with a hot red sunrise over a sand-colored city and the sound of the Adhan ringing in the desert air.

Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar.

The song is so beautiful and speaks so directly to what's in my heart that I don't think I can watch the rest. I can't bear to see what they'll do to this city and these people. I turn the movie off, but the song still echoes in my mind.

Allahu akbar. Allahu akbar.

No one is going to die. Nothing is destroyed. The faithful are being called to pray.

I'm waiting for something to happen.

I'm watching the feet, all the different shoes, so many shoes, and never the same pair. Who would want to look at a face ever again? The scuffs on the toe box, the careful, floppy knots, the way they cross, uncross, shift, and graze the floor while waiting for a plane. They express all the tenderness and disappointment possible to be felt. I've been lying on this bench looking at feet for so long that I no longer understand feet. The quantity of feet has destroyed the idea of feet. I can't remember how they fit into the larger structure of a body. They seem quite independent of legs and torsos and heads, alien concepts to me now, each pair with a will of its own. The *clop clop clop* of the steps swallows up all voices and becomes a kind of silence. There's nothing left in the world, just feet and floor and their endless fascination with each other.

I'm waiting for this to give way to oblivion, but it never does. It keeps going. How can it keep going?

A new set of feet stop on the floor in front of me. Black hooves, cleft in the middle, attached to enormous legs dripping matted fur. In my body, in the bench, I can feel the floor shaking in a new way under the weight of a truly monstrous creature. I should be terrified, but instead I'm flooded with relief. At last! I think. Every inch of my skin is taut and tingling. I realize that I've been waiting for this my whole life. I stand up, ready to face this new nightmare, but the creature that stares back is not what I was expecting. For several seconds, I can't make sense of it at all. It has a long snout, preposterous lips, and black eyes as big as golf balls. It's being led on a leash by a smiling woman in a Space Needle apron. The animal is wearing a matching bandana around its neck, and bells dangle from a harness on its face. It stares at me for a few seconds, this impossible animal, as though it can read my thoughts.

Hello! says the smiling woman. Would you like to hug a llama today?

Oh, I say. I know I must look disappointed, because the woman's smile briefly twitches apart. I can see there's no other way out of this, so I agree to the hug.

This is Wendel, she says, carrying on with her usual script. Wendel is a licensed therapy llama. He's six years old and weighs just over four hundred pounds. We know traveling can be stressful, so Wendel and I like to come visit the airport now and then to cheer people up. Do you want me to take your picture with him?

Sure, I say.

I give the woman my phone. Go ahead, she says. Don't be shy. Wendel loves hugs. He's a very friendly boy.

Wendel and I are about the same height. His rabbit ears give him an inch or two on me, but we stand eye-to-eye. This makes him feel strangely like a human, or at least an equal. His eyes are unfriendly, uninterested, sheathed in elaborate black lashes. I put my arm around his neck. I can feel the solid ropes of muscle under his hair. He doesn't react to my touch, as though I were a fly that landed on him. I make an effort to smile. The woman takes our picture.

Wendel will give you a kiss too, she says. He's a great kisser.

She pulls a carrot stick from her apron and tells me to hold it between my teeth. Wendel takes the carrot out of my mouth. His lips brush mine for an instant, and I inhale his rich, sour breath. Then it's over. I get my phone back, and the woman guides the llama down the concourse to meet a family with young children. I can still feel the echo of his lips on my skin, the rubbery flesh and scratchy little hairs.

How I would've loved to get a hug and a kiss from a llama once! If only I'd met Wendel last month or last week. It would've made a world of difference to me then. Even just two days

ago, it would've given me the strength to be happy for another year. But it's nothing to me now. There's no power in touch anymore.

I have to do something. Do what? Anything, it doesn't matter. Take a step. Now another. I feel ridiculous, like a cat walking on its hind legs. I find myself in a food court, or at least that's what they call it. It's a hideous place. The sight of all these people eating makes me sick. There's an enormous window, thirty feet tall, and suddenly I remember I've been to this airport. In fact, I spent a long time here once. It was a few weeks ago. It was a lifetime ago. Here's the table where I sat with that young architect while he explained the airport to me, as if the airport wasn't all I knew and all I would ever know. He told me he dreamed of building an airport with no ceiling. Or was it me telling him? Was it me telling him how I was lost underground for a thousand years, and I was scared, I was waiting in the dark for someone to come save me, but no one ever did? If I walk a little further, I'll find the bench where I sat with that old woman. We were dizzy, both of us, so dizzy and confused, and that's why we had to sit down. Now here's the bookstore where I bought that book. What was it called again? I can't remember, but I know it was about a rich family who did a lot of talking and waiting around for something to happen. Where is that book anyway? I must've lost it. Maybe I can buy a new one. I go into the store and start pulling books off the shelves at random. There's *Trouble on the Wainscot* and *The Land of Soup and Cashmere* and *Yolanda's Full-Service Lawn Service* and *Trippingly, You Swedes!* and *Putrid Stuff* and *Again and Again and Again.* It's all nonsense. It's all just tar and mucus and pissed-on snow. What were we thinking when we wrote them? I take a big grey book and open it to the middle. I wouldn't be surprised to find cockroaches and roly-polys pressed between the pages, but instead there are words. I read some of them.

He wanted a boy. Not a son; that would've been too much. He'd no interest in caring for a child or in binding its curiosity into a neat and functional shape. A nephew to visit summers would be perfect. What he wanted was a boy to amuse him, a boy to make the hedges and the spiders in the shed dire. When his eyes strained from reading, he could look out the window of his study and watch the boy having a thoughtful, boyish experience. Sometimes, when he was in the mood, he could even help the boy on his little adventures, offer assistance and wisdom like a great old wizard. The house and the yard would be new to the boy, and he could welcome or ignore that newness as it pleased him.

I can't help thinking of my book, Cody's book, about Beethoven and his nephew. It feels as though this paragraph was plagiarized from my book, the version of my book that started existing in my head a few seconds ago. My heart pounds with outrage. I check the picture on the jacket, thinking I might very well see my own face looking back at me. The author is a man with no hair or eyebrows or eyelashes. The image is somehow disturbing, and I put the book back on its shelf. But now I'm infected with the idea of my book, Cody's book. And what does it matter who wrote it, really, since the book doesn't exist, was never finished? It might as well be mine. Why shouldn't I claim it? I suddenly feel that everything that belongs to Cody might as well belong to me. When I think about it, I find it difficult to understand the distinction between Cody and me. What are the differences between us, really? To begin with, I guess I've never had a single thought about Beethoven in my entire life, while Cody seems to have thought about him quite a lot. But even this I can't be sure of. Is it possible that I've always been thinking about Beethoven on some subconscious level, and it took meeting Devon to realize it? Is it possible that I really am Cody, and now that someone has recognized me, I can finally recognize myself? Devon's gone, but Cody is still here. He could stay, I think, if I want him to.

It occurs to me that I should write Cody's book, my book. I should finish the work we started. I've never wanted to write a book before, but it seems entirely reasonable that I could do it. I think I have the creative energy for such a project, and I certainly have the time for it. I'll do research. I'll listen to Beethoven's music and read about his life. In fact, I can start right now. I go to the biography section, and lo and behold they have a book on Beethoven, a tome over a thousand pages long. I flip through it, my wrists aching under the weight. How can there possibly be this much to say about one person? There must be over a hundred chapters, the early years, the middle years, the late-middle, the middle-late. It's absurd. Suddenly, the very notion of biography seems ridiculous. What evidence is there to support the notion that reading about a person's life would allow us to understand them? What is it with this conflation of experience and selfhood? It's all these damn books that have tricked us into thinking that a person is their history, when, in reality, the two couldn't be farther apart. Our past has nothing to do with who we are. It decides nothing. Every second of consciousness springs from an infinite reservoir of soul which language and memory can't hope to touch.

When I think about it, I realize that it defeats the point of writing the book if I learn about Beethoven's life beforehand. The real test would be to write it without knowing anything. Yes, I think that's right. The point of the book is to use the figures of Beethoven and his nephew as means of expressing an inner truth, to write about them as they exist in my mind, untarnished by the facts of history. A novel is a work of art, after all, a product of imagination and soul.

I buy a notebook and a set of pencils and look for a place to sit down and write. After walking for too long, I find an empty seat at a charging table. Humble beginnings, but when this is all over, I'll remember this table and the smattering of crumbs and the sunscreen fingerprints on the window looking out at the runway.

I open the book to the first page. At the top, I write the title.

Beethoven's Nephew

by Cody Bishop

Once this is done, I think about what the first sentence of the book should be. After considering this for a few minutes, I write,

Beethoven looked up from the piano; his nephew was playing in the garden.

I read this back several times, then close the book. I realize this is a process which can't be rushed.

On the way to Taipei City, I sit in the middle seat between a woman reading a book and Dustin, a skinny young man who's afraid of flying. He's on the verge of panic, sitting with his seatbelt fastened as tight as it will go. His hands travel back and forth between the armrests and his head, tucking strands of black hair behind his ears. Now and then he folds himself over into brace position, breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth. I can almost hear him counting in his head. In, two, three, out, two, three. By the indirect glow of the woman's reading light, I talk with Dustin to try to help him relax. I start by telling him about how safe air travel is. I tell him it's the safest way to travel, safer than cars or trains or boats. I give him as many poster-facts as I can remember.

Did you know you'd have to fly 3.5 million times before you died in a plane crash? I say. For some reason this doesn't seem to comfort him.

I think let's move off planes, Dustin says. Ask me a question.

Okay, I say. Where are you headed?

Taiwan, he says. Ask me something totally random.

Uh, what's your favorite bird?

I don't know birds, he says. Maybe a falcon. Ask me another one.

Do you floss? I say.

No, he says. Another, more random than that.

What do you know about Beethoven? I say.

Hm, that's a good one. I know a lot about Beethoven, actually. Apparently, scientists now think he was putting a lead-based mousse in his hair, and that's what made his hair look like that. And apparently the lead seeped into his brain, and that's why he was so angry at everyone all the time. I think it made him deaf too. And apparently, they think he might have had Tourette

syndrome, though he kept it pretty well under wraps. He'd try to get it out of his system before a big concert. People would sometimes see him backstage blinking and clapping and stomping and shouting curses. *Shit! Fuck! Cunt!* That sort of thing.

Oh, I say. I didn't know that.

That was a good question, Dustin says. Ask me another like that.

I regret asking Dustin about Beethoven. What he said might be true, but somehow I feel he didn't take the question seriously. I feel like I've offered to share a special toy with him, and he returned it to me dirty and broken.

The woman on the window turns off her reading light and tries to go to sleep.

What do you think happens after we die? I say.

That's an easy one, he says. You go back to the start. You live your life again, exactly as you lived it.

Interesting, I say.

No, I'm not kidding, he says. I'm serious. This is actually my most fundamental belief. I know for a fact that's what happens after we die. And I think we all know it, even if we don't all admit it. We know that we've lived all this already. I'm completely serious, by the way. I think we all feel this deep down. It's an innate understanding. Déjà vu, that's not your brain spazzing out, that's you waking up to the reality that this moment and every moment is encased in amber, eternal, because it's been lived before and will be lived again and again and again. Your life is a solid thing, unmovable, unchangeable, and every moment of it is happening at once, only you can only experience it one second at a time. When you get to the end you start over again, and it's exactly the same. You can't even count how many times you've lived, because there was never a first time and there will never be a last time. It just keeps happening. It passes by with a

breath, a thousand lifetimes, just like that. Just now, just while we've been sitting here, we've lived a thousand times. I'm so serious.

I believe you, I say. I think if I just agree with him, he'll stop talking sooner and I'll get to work on my Beethoven book in peace.

That's why it's so important that we're good to each other, Dustin says. That's why we have to help each other lead good lives without pain and suffering. Just think about it. If we live the same life forever, then every momentary discomfort isn't actually momentary. Everything we feel, every good feeling but every bad feeling too, lasts forever. Even fleeting pain is a universe of misery somewhere. Because it doesn't end. I mean really think about it. Think of all the people that live hard, short lives, and never get to experience real joy. All the dead children and babies. It's horrible when you really think about it. Think of all the aborted fetuses. Think about what that's like, existing as a flickering consciousness in the dark forever, never knowing the world, never knowing love or anything at all. A few weeks, a few months, you just exist in this nothingness with nothing happening until you die and start again, still in the dark, still knowing nothing, over and over and over. Eternal silence. I think it's the worst possible fate. That's why I founded Atheists For Life.

Oh yeah? I say.

It's the only non-religious pro-life organization in the country, he says. But we operate internationally too. Our mission is to make abortion illegal in every country in the world. That's why I'm making the trip to Taiwan. They have a few small pro-life groups, but they haven't gained much traction yet. We're going to help them organize, hopefully turn their grass-roots movement into serious change. Taiwan has the most appalling abortion laws in the world. It's a holocaust, I mean it.

The woman on the window sits up suddenly.

You're a horrible person, she says. You're horrible. Both of you. Then she settles back down and goes to sleep.

Dustin gives me a smug smile. I can see the whites of his teeth glowing in the dark. What happened to the young man trembling with fear of flying? I feel that I've been tricked. They've been working together, the two of them, to trick me. This isn't right, I want to say. I'm not supposed to be here.

Both of you, she said. Both of you? But what did *I* do?

Airplanes are animals.

Airplanes are cities.

I find an outdoor garden in the Taoyuan International Airport. It's very hot, enclosed on all sides by enormous windows that sharpen the sun's light like a magnifying glass. There are a few shrubby trees, shriveled bamboo shoots, a square pond with fish, and white concrete steps leading to a small pagoda. I lie down in the middle of the path, using a balled-up sweater as a pillow, because I want to look at the sky, and I don't care what they say to me. Hello, sir, they might say. Do you think you could find somewhere else to lie down? Oh, I suppose so, I'll say, and take a long time getting up and going away.

The glare from the window is strong, so I cup my hands around my eyes. I watch the planes. I can hear jets taking off and landing on the runway nearby, but I can't see them. It's only the high-up planes that pass through this little portal of sky. They're not stopping to land here, these planes that I catch between my hands like tadpoles in a handful of creek water. They fly on to some other destination, tiny and colorless and quiet. They come in from behind my fingers and go out through my palm, and sometimes they go the other direction. There are no clouds.

As I lie on my back and watch the planes, these thoughts wander into my head like someone is whispering them in my ear.

Airplanes are animals.

Airplanes are cities.

I don't feel the need to question the truth of these statements or to press myself for some justification. The thoughts just keep coming.

Airplanes are songs.

Airplanes are wedding dresses.

And the part of me that's listening just nods its head and says, Alright, whatever you say.

Airplanes are memories, the other says.

Airplanes are secrets.

Well, okay.

Airplanes are soap bubbles.

Airplanes are the fortress of heaven.

Oh, do you think so?

Yes. And airplanes are also sugar, and spiderwebs, and ice, and children who get lost and are never found.

I see.

Now the listener feels inspired to play along and stares into the empty sky trying to think of something to say. Just then, a little plane passes lazily through the gap, gathering all the blue around itself as it goes. I've got it, the listener says. Airplanes are forgotten faces.

Well? Aren't they?

My back burns from the hot concrete. Sweat rolls off my face into my ears. This isn't fun anymore, but I don't move, hoping to recover the feeling I was feeling just a moment ago.

A boy stands over me. He looks concerned. He turns his head like a puppy but doesn't get too close, as though he thinks I might jump up and try to grab him. He goes away. I'm starting to feel pretty stupid. He comes back with several other children of various sizes. They whisper to each other in Chinese. Some seem to be taking this very seriously, while others giggle and dart in and out like they're playing around a bonfire. They send the oldest to check on me, a girl of about ten.

Hello, she says politely, bending over my face.

Hello, I say, and she runs back to the group as though I just exploded.

They stand around for a minute waiting to see what I'll do. Then the first boy has an idea. He walks up, pauses for a moment, then steps over me. The other children shower him with laughter. He comes back around, this time at a run, and leaps over my face. The other children join in, running and jumping, laughing and singing some Taiwanese version of Jack be nimble, Jack be quick. Their little feet kick just inches above my nose, shoelaces clicking and flapping like wings. There's nothing to do now but wait. Still there are the planes, only ever one at a time, and so far away they might not exist at all.

Sometimes, when the weather was nice, Beethoven and his nephew would take a stroll through the countryside before dinner. It was late summer, the air was warm and dry, so that day they decided to do just that. The boy put on his boots and cap. Beethoven took his walking stick from the rack by the door. When they were ready, they went down the front steps and started up the path that led out of town toward the forests and farms around Vienna.

Everyone that crossed paths with them knew Beethoven. The women curtsied to him, and the gentlemen took off their hats and said, "Good evening, Herr Beethoven." Of course, he could not hear them, but when he saw their greeting he returned a gruff, "Hello." Other times he just walked by glaring at the ground, not noticing them or pretending not to. No one ever thought to say hello to Beethoven's nephew. This made the boy feel a little invisible, like a ghost.

Not much was said on these walks. Beethoven could read lips pretty well, but this still meant that the two could not speak properly unless they were standing face to face. His nephew sometimes forgot this and made an attempt at conversation.

"Look at that big fat cow," he said. "I've never seen a cow so big and fat."

But when he turned to receive his uncle's response, he found Beethoven deep in concentration, waving his stick out in front of him to the rhythm of some song in his head.

"Composition is very simple, dear nephew," he said, more loudly than he might've needed to. "Every melody starts with a single note. From there it must go up or down. Up is the way of hope, down the way of despair. That's all there is."

He imagined that the boy made some superficial response to this statement which he did not hear. In reality, his nephew was entirely occupied with kicking a stone down the path. Inside the stone there was a boy, like him, only tiny, curled up in the dark like an apple at the bottom of

a barrel. As the stone rolled down the path, the boy cried out in fear. "Stop! Stop!" he said. "Please! I want to stop! I want to get out!" But no one could hear him.

Beethoven paused to stare out at the darkening fields, his quick, strong hands resting on the head of his stick.

"The wheat is getting tall," he said. "They will be harvesting soon."

On the flight to London, I'm sitting again in the middle seat. I'm working on my novel, my notebook open on the tray table. This time I won't be distracted. I won't eat or sleep or talk to anyone, I'll just keep writing until we land. Though she doesn't so much as glance in my direction, I can sense the attention of my neighbor sitting in the aisle seat. She's young, probably only fourteen, but she's put on a mature face, dressing herself like a politician or a news anchor. She's also writing something in a notebook on her own tray table, though her notebook is slimmer and more elegant than mine, and she writes in pen, not pencil. For a long time, we write together in silence. And although we're both intensely focused on our own work, our thoughts keep turning toward each other. By and by, she or I will look up as though about to share a thought, but then we go back to our work without speaking. This goes on for a while until finally we both look up at the same exact time, and it's undeniable now. Our eyes meet. We exchange polite, ambassadorial smiles.

The girl's name is Li-ju. As though anticipating a question, she tells me that she splits her time between a father in London and a mother in Taipei, so she's often flying on her own between these cities. The long flights are a great opportunity to get work done, she says, gesturing to the mostly-filled notebook on the tray table. She speaks with a deep and strangely

self-possessed voice, making her seem not like a child but just a smallish adult. She asks me what I'm writing, and I tell her it's a novel about Beethoven and his nephew.

I like the sound of that, she says. I've written a few novels myself. It's quite an undertaking, isn't it?

I agree that it is and ask Li-ju about her novels. She gives a cursory summary of a few of them. One is about a political leader in the Taiwanese independence movement who betrays his comrades to the Chinese government for the release of his son. Another is about an aspiring fire-eater who works at a chip factory, but Li-ju doesn't seem want to talk about this. Her words trail off, and she gives a smiling wince, as though embarrassed by her juvenilia.

I look at the lines of verse in her notebook. What're you working on now, I ask. It doesn't look like a novel.

She chuckles. No, it's not, she says. I'm quite finished with novel writing, actually. This is a different sort of project.

I always wanted to be an author, Li-ju says, but a few years ago, it occurred to me that I'll soon be living in a world that can't support the publishing industry, or, for that matter, industrial civilization of any kind. We've already reached the tipping point with climate change. There are dozens of feedback loops in motion now that can't be reversed, not even if every country in the world stopped burning fossil fuels today. It's done. There's no stopping it. Global average temperatures are going to rise past the two-degree threshold, probably a good deal past it. Food systems will collapse and there will be widespread famine, war. You know the rest. Those who survive will have no resources for writing and printing books. We won't have the infrastructure to support large publishing and distribution entities, and we just won't have the time for it. The average life expectancy of a paperback book is about forty years. The clock will start ticking on

the day HarperCollins and Penguin close their doors for the last time or are bombed into oblivion. Forty years. That's how long books will have to exist in the world, and probably less because the forests are depleted, so we'll need to burn them for fuel.

I know I'm putting this rather bluntly, she says, but believe me when I say that this has been a hard thing for me to come to terms with. As long as I can remember, I've wanted to write novels. Now I find I'm coming into a world where this is no longer possible. I tried to deny it for a long time, but I accept it now. The novel is over. It's an extinct medium. It's like the rest of us, dead but it doesn't know it yet. It took me a long time to figure out what I should do next, how I can channel my creative energy into something more appropriate for this new world. The law of nature is adapt or die.

Li-ju gives a drawn-out sigh, smiling pityingly at me. Her tone of voice makes it seem as though this is something she talks about all the time, and she's grown tired of hearing herself repeat the same sentiments over and over.

I'm sorry, she says, I know this has been a long explanation. I'll try to cut to the chase. Essentially, for the past few years I've been looking into the storytelling traditions of pre-civilized cultures to try to predict what our post-apocalyptic literary landscape will look like. What you find is that in these oral-based storytelling traditions there's more of an emphasis on songs and poetry, naturally, because they're easier to remember. You also see less of an emphasis on coming up with new stories, and instead the focus is on re-telling those from a fixed canon of folktales. You can already see the Western film industry heading in this direction. It's not new characters and new stories audiences want to see, but just more of the familiar franchises. More archetypes, less real people. The way I see it, these franchises like Star Wars and Marvel, in the post-civilized world they're going to be our Epic of Gilgamesh, our Beowulf,

our Mahabharata. And these stories will evolve, and we'll get many different variations of them, but just like with ancient folktales, I expect that we'll have something of a definitive version, like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, a version of high-quality which can be circulated orally, but also written down and copied by scribes over generations. So, to make a very long story short, I'm working on re-writing Harry Potter as an epic poem.

Oh, wow, I say. Is that hard?

Yes and no, Li-ju says. If the text and I somehow survive into the coming decades, I think it's pretty much guaranteed to be a success. The people who remain will be desperate for the comfort of a familiar story, and I don't imagine I'll have much competition. So in that sense, I don't feel a lot of pressure on the quality of the verse. But condensing is certainly a concern. There are seven books to get through, over four thousand pages in total, and ideally each book shouldn't take more than an hour to perform. Would you like to see some?

Yes please, I say.

Li-ju hands me her notebook, but she quickly draws it back.

Actually, she says, I think it's better if I read out loud. It'll be easier to get a sense of the meter that way. Alright, here it goes. This is from the second book, near the end.

In the girl's bathroom there was a ghost who lived there all alone.
Her soul cried out both night and day, though her body'd turned to stone.
In the greatest rush, Harry went to talk with her one day.
He said, "I'm looking for a little girl – I think she passed this way."
The ghost said, "Yes, I've seen her. She went with one I know,
The boy who took my heart, then took my life so long ago.

He always was a handsome lad, with darkly furrowed brow.

He talked to snakes. We thought him great! You remind me of him somehow.

He touched me on the shoulder, and it gave me quite a shock,

Then he led me to a quiet place where he and I could talk.

He said he loved only me – well imagine my surprise

When I leaned in to take his kiss and found that I had died.

But that was many years ago, so I do not think I mind

He likes this girl with bright red hair, not raven black like mine.

I'll try to help you, if I can, to show you where they went,

Though I fear that you are much too late. Her life is surely spent.

Eternally, her soul will roam alone there in the dark.

Forever's a long time, you know, to nurse a broken heart.

I hope she'll come to visit me in my bathroom stall above,

So we can talk about that funny boy who killed the things he loved."

What do you think? Li-ju says.

I think it's good, I say. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with the story.

Oh, even better, she says. That makes you a valuable reader indeed. Do you think it stands alone? Does it make sense without having read the book?

I think so, I say.

Good, good. She squints for a few seconds at the page, holding her pen between her lips. I imagine you can hear the influences from English and American folksongs, she says. Murder

ballads and the like. I've not tried to put it to a melody, though I'd like to. I'm afraid I don't have much of an ear for music.

We're both silent for a while as Li-ju considers the neatly printed lines. I'm thinking about how her poem might exist in a future wasteland. I imagine the words floating up through the smoke of a book-fire, longingly sung by voices cracked with thirst.

Li-ju suddenly turns to me, her eyes bright and questioning.

I hope I didn't offend you with all my talk of novels being a dead medium. You're a practicing novelist, after all. I have the greatest respect for what you do, I hope you know that. Do you think I could have a look at your manuscript?

Um, yes. Why not, I say.

It takes her a long time to read the few bits I've managed to write so far. She glares intently at the words, dampening her fingers to turn the pages like an old schoolteacher. Finally, once she's finished, she turns to me, frowning and nodding.

It's very interesting, she says. Nearly every line I read I would think to myself, Oh, that's interesting. She looks up over my head for a moment, her lips pressed together as though she's trying to decide how to put what she's thinking tactfully. Beethoven's nephew's name was Carl, I think I'm right in saying. If that helps. It might be nice to use his name now and then instead of referring to him always as the boy or Beethoven's nephew. Don't you think?

Yes, I say. No, that makes sense. Thank you for that.

Anytime, she says.

It seems that everyone knows more about Beethoven than me. It's becoming a little tiresome. I'm the one who has to write the book.

It's only now that I notice my seatmate on the window, who's also writing in a notebook. He's a strange-looking man with oily hair, wearing clothes that fit him poorly. He has a white legal pad out on his tray table, and he uses a big marker to write on it. With quiet concentration, he draws hundreds of black Xs along the ruled lines. I watch until the page is filled from end to end with Xs, nothing but Xs, a solid block of Xs. Then he turns over a new sheet and starts again.

The thing is that Beethoven doesn't really understand Carl. In his own way, he cares for the boy, but he doesn't understand him. He thinks it's grief that makes him act the way he does, but the truth is that Carl almost never feels sad about his parents. He almost never thinks about them at all. Perhaps it's because he doesn't quite believe they're gone. He feels that his new life with his uncle doesn't really count. It's a long trip, and sooner or later he'll come home, and his mother and father will be there to ask him how it was, what did they do, what did they say, how did it feel. And I think maybe it will always be this way, he will always feel like a visitor in his life. He'll go around noticing things and feeling curious and bored at intervals, waiting to come home to tell someone about all the strange things that happened.

I'm waiting to get on a flight to New York. They're boarding two different planes at this gate, and they're both supposed to take off at more or less the same time. That would be confusing enough if the flight numbers weren't also nearly identical, and if the intercom system weren't also broken, forcing the gate agents to shout at the crowd of passengers standing around with their luggage between their legs like emperor penguins. People keep trying to board the wrong plane. There's lots of pointing and shouting and waving tickets at nonresponsive faces. At the front of a long line, a flustered old woman tries to explain to the gate agent that her grandmother knew the Wright Brothers.

She met them when they came to Rome to show off their new flying machine. Excuse me. She was their maid in the hotel where they were staying. Hello? Are you listening to me?

Ma'am, step out of line please. Ma'am, I'm working, please go away.

The old woman turns to address the rest of us standing around the gate. She gives us a look that seems to say, What the hell is wrong with all of you? Then she sees me, and it's like a ray of sunshine has fallen on her. There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you! I try to

slink away behind a pillar, but there's no hiding from her. She waddles up to me and takes my arm. She stands very close, as though for warmth. She's covered from head to foot in a grey, clay-like substance.

The older brother, Wilbert, he was very rude to my Nonna, she says. But the younger brother was kind. He was a good tipper. He would talk with my Nonna as she tidied up the rooms. One day, she said to him, So, Mr. Wright, are you worried about what they'll do with your new flying machine? Worried? he said. Why worried? They will go anywhere in the world, they will be free like birds, that's what they'll do. Yes, my Nonna said, they will do that. But they'll do other things too. They'll take bombs up with them, and they'll drop them, and a lot of people will get hurt, and there will be nothing anyone can do to stop them. She was right, of course, but she could tell this made him upset, so she said, Nevertheless, it's a very pretty machine.

I try to pull out of her grasp, but I'm afraid I'm going to hurt her. I'm sorry, I say. I think they're calling my plane.

No, no, wait, she says. There's more. You see, in the war, when the Americans were bombing Rome, my family would hide in the cellar and listen to the thundering planes and the *boom* explosions all around. My Nonna would stare up at the ceiling and shake her head. Poor Mr. Wright, she would say. My little brother was crying in my mother's arms, and I was praying to God. I said, Please God, please don't let us die! Mother screamed at my Nonna. Poor Mr. Wright? she said. Poor us! Poor Italy! But my Nonna just shook her head. Poor Mr. Wright, she said. That poor, poor man.

I'm sorry, I say. That's my boarding group. I have to go. I really have to go.

I yank myself away and start to run. The old woman stumbles. Her mouth falls open in horror. Wait! she says. You can't go! She chases after me. When the war ended, I wrote him a letter. Listen to me! I sent him a picture of Vatican City blown to bits by American bombs and a letter that said, How do you like your flying machine now, Mr. Wright? Are you happy now, now that you've destroyed the world?

I scan my ticket and hurry through the gate, leaving the old woman behind. She calls after me. Come back! she says. Then once more, sweetly, without a shred of hope. Come back.

Through the gate, there's a hallway that leads down for a long time. It turns this way and that, then comes to a fork with no signs to indicate which direction I should go. Without slowing down, I choose a path. There's no one else here, no other passengers aside from me. I come to a pair of sliding glass doors that open onto the tarmac. Outside, it's cold and bright, and the wind rips at my clothes. Two identical planes sit parked to the left and right. An aircraft marshaller shuffles by with his wands in his armpits. He's wearing an enormous winter coat, and his face looks tiny and far away under his hood.

Excuse me, I say. Which plane goes to New York?

He frowns at me, and I repeat the question. He gestures to the plane on the right. Your New York, he says. Then to the plane on the left. Not Your New York.

I thank him and walk through the wind to my plane. At the top of the airstairs, leaning through the open door, a flight attendant waves to me making hurry-up gestures. I jog up the steps, and the moment I alight into the cabin she closes the door behind me, as though to seal us in against some monster, some shapeshifter, that's pursuing us.

My seat is at the back of the plane. The aisle and middle seat passengers are already here, and they have to get up to let me in. The passenger in the middle is a tiny old man. He's wearing

a linen suit and has a thick head of hair that looks like it came at a cost. When I sit down, he gives me a listening smile, as though I was just in the middle of telling him a funny story.

Hi, I'm Eddie, he says, and he shakes my hand.

Cody, I say. Cody Bishop.

Where do I know you from, Cody? he asks. His teeth are unnaturally white, and his breath smells like cough syrup and blood.

I'm sorry, I say. I don't think we've met.

Eddie shakes his head. We definitely have, I'm sure of it. I'm a very social guy, and I've been around for a *long* time. I don't think there's a soul alive I haven't met.

Eddie turns to the passenger in the aisle seat and squeezes his arm. Jonathan here, and this is pure serendipity, we used to go to the same gym in Chelsea back in the twenty-tens.

Jonathan doesn't acknowledge this. He's a big man with no hair on his head or face, no eyebrows and no eyelashes. My heart skips a beat. I wish Eddie would let go of his arm.

Now, I know you from somewhere, he says. Just let me think. I have a very good memory, and I never forget a face.

He looks at me with his fingertips pressed to his lips. The project requires Eddie to have full access to my face, so I sit like I'm having my portrait done. The hardest part is knowing what to look at. I can't look at the old man's eyes, and I certainly can't look at Jonathan, so I settle on a fecal-brown stain on Eddie's lapel. We sit in complete silence for half a minute as he studies me, as the plane taxis past glowing runway lights. Night comes all at once.

I'll think of it eventually, Eddie says at last. It would be impossible for me to forget a face like yours. Such a pretty face. I hope you don't mind me saying. I don't think I've ever seen

a face quite like yours. Such an innocent face, completely pure, porcelain really. Like a page with nothing written on it. But beautiful, yes, very beautiful.

The plane is taking off now. There's a cacophony of motion and speed and a hundred plastic seats all groaning at once. We lift into the air and bank to the west. They dim the cabin lights. I hope in vain that Eddie will have to stop looking at me now, but his smile stays fixed on me. His perfect teeth seem to glow in the dark.

Please don't be embarrassed, he says. Beauty is my business. I can't help but notice a beautiful face when I see one. I'm a decorator, you see. All day long I just traipse around the city looking for the most beautiful chairs, the most beautiful tables, the most beautiful curtains. I have a sharp eye for beauty.

Eddie takes out his phone and starts scrolling through pictures of his clients' houses. The houses themselves might be all right, but the pictures are awful. I don't know if it's the lighting or the cameraman, but I can't seem to make out a single object, not one piece of furniture. There's only a procession of colors and shapes, implying vulgarity and wealth. Eddie seems desperate for me to approve.

Here's one I did for a couple in Kensington. Whenever you have lighting like this you just *have* to introduce plants, lots of houseplants. I love plants, don't you? Especially when they droop or dangle like this. And art, I love art. Especially Native American art and African art, all that raw, primal beauty. I love this woodcarving. Don't you love it?

It takes me a while to think of something to say. Eddie suddenly draws his phone to his chest, as though I tried to take it from him. His face is shocked, heartbroken.

It's a very beautiful carving, I manage to say.

He melts with relief. He puts the phone out between us again and swipes quickly through a few more pictures.

I love them, he says. My houses. They're so beautiful to me. I love beautiful things. They give purpose to my life.

He's looking at me again. With every second, the looking becomes less playful, less curious, growing in intensity, turning frantic, dire. Is it just the ice-blue glow from his phone, or do his eyes really have cracks running through them?

I know you, he says. I know I know you. And this is going to kill me, *kill me*. Listen, Cody. I took a Diazepam before we took off, and I think I'm going to be falling asleep in a minute or two. Here's what I'd like to do. I'd like to take a picture of you, if that's all right. Because I'm going to figure this out. Even if I have to study your face for a month, I'm going to figure out where I know you from. What do you say?

I look to the man in the aisle seat, as though he might put a stop to this. But he doesn't do anything. He's sitting perfectly straight, staring ahead, eyes open in the dark.

Alright, I say.

Eddie holds his phone up to my face. Now hold still, he says. And smile!

I smile and try not to squint too much in the bright flash that follows.

Eddie admires his handiwork. Oh yes, he says. Beautiful. He turns the phone around to show me. There I am, trapped on his smudgy screen. It's my face, the same as always, but it's different somehow. Somehow, I'm unlike anything I've ever seen.

Now I'll have you forever, he says. A minute later, he's sleeping.

Almost immediately, I have to pee. The feeling comes all at once, like a bee sting. I can feel the urine swelling inside my bladder, burning through my body, fighting to get out. Why

does this always happen to me? How do I always seem to find myself stuck behind the merest barriers, cornered by people as small and insubstantial as Eddie? Asleep, he seems even tinier, slumped in his seat like a doll. The aisle passenger is gone. I can't remember when he left. I half think I imagined him. The only thing standing between me and the bathroom is Eddie, just this frail old man. But it's enough.

I know I shouldn't have to pee this badly already. I know it doesn't make sense. It must be in my head. It must just be the fear of being stuck. But if it's in my head then why does it hurt so much? Why can I feel my bladder throbbing inside me, my cheeks flushing with blood? I open the vent over my head, desperate for cold air. I close my eyes and breathe deeply. I try to imagine the reassuring voice of a pilot telling me to sit back, relax, and enjoy the flight, but it dissolves into garbled static and mayday dispatches. My eyes fly open. I look outside. The wing of the plane is shaking like plastic, its little red light bobbing up and down. The wing seems barely connected to us, barely necessary for flight. If it broke off and spun away into darkness, we would keep on flying, unbothered.

I give Eddie a light touch on the shoulder.

Eddie, I whisper. Could I get out for a minute?

He doesn't move. He doesn't seem to be breathing. His mouth is closed. More than closed, it's collapsed, a caved-in mine trapping dozens under the rubble.

I have to distract myself somehow. None of the in-flight movies seem potent enough to do the trick, not even the romance-comedy-action-musicals, so instead I decide to work on *Beethoven's Nephew.* I take out my notebook, turn on the booklight, and prepare to start a new chapter. Beethoven is sitting at the piano, and Carl comes into the room and says hello, and Beethoven says hello back, but I can't think of what else they should say. It seems they have no

reason to talk to each other. Beethoven just wants to compose his music, and Carl just wants to be alone with his thoughts, so why should they say anything at all? I think maybe I just need a running start. I go back to the beginning and read through what I've written so far. Not much happens between the two of them, no conflict and no change. Mostly they just go on walks and eat dinner and sometimes play music. I can't think of anything else I want them to do. When I come to the last page, I somehow feel that's it. There's no ending, but it's over, simply because I can't write another word. In my head, the mystery of the book is solved. Shouldn't that make the writing easier? But it's impossible now. It feels as though they don't want me around anymore. They're waiting for me to leave so they can get on with their music and their thoughts which can become real only in silence.

That's that. I close the notebook and stick it in the seatback pocket. I imagine leaving it on the plane for someone to discover. Maybe a flight attendant or a future passenger. They'll pick it up and read it and recognize it as a work of subtle genius. They'll make use of some connection, some friend of a friend, and they'll get the manuscript published, unfinished though it is. Maybe, years from now, I'll come across it in an airport bookstore. *Beethoven's Nephew* by Cody Bishop. I'll buy it and read it, having forgotten by then that I was the book's author, having forgotten that I was Cody Bishop in another life long ago. I'll feel bewildered by the shocking familiarity of the words, as though the author went digging through my own heart, as though he pulled the story from the depths of my own longing and despair. There will be an afterward by an important writer explaining the mysterious origins of the text, how it was discovered, unfinished, on an airplane, how it was quietly published, how its popularity grew through word of mouth until it reached the status of a minor modern classic. It will end like this:

Once in a lifetime, if they're lucky, a writer gets to do something that is beyond them. A book comes to them out of nowhere and changes everything. It explodes their ideas of what is possible and renews their capacity for wonder and delight. It's wrong to imagine that such a book can be written. It simply falls out of a clear blue sky, and all we can hope to do is catch it.

I just remembered where I know you from.

Eddie has woken up. He's digging his fingers into the meat of my thigh.

When I was a boy, he says, I had this fantasy that I revisited for years. In the fantasy, I was beautiful. I was the most beautiful person alive, and it was agonizing for people to look at me. That's how beautiful I was. And one day, as I was walking down the street, some men jumped out and threw me in a van. They blindfolded me and tied me up, and I traveled for a long time in darkness. Eventually I fell asleep. When I came to, I was naked in a glass box on a stage. Below, I could see a crowd of rich, evil men. They'd all paid fortunes just to see my beautiful naked body. They looked so angry, like they were angered by my beauty, like they wanted to destroy it. I knew what I was supposed to do, but I was too scared to do it. I was shy. I tried to hide myself behind my hands. I crouched and cowered in the corner of my glass box. But then I saw something. There was a face in the crowd, a face that didn't belong, a face unlike all the others. It was a kind, innocent face, a beautiful face, almost as beautiful as mine. I couldn't understand how such a sweet face could end up in a place like that. It was your face. It was you. It was you I saw in that crowd of evil men. And seeing you gave me the strength to do what I had to do. It was enough to know I had a friend out there, someone like me. Slowly, I unfurled myself, and this is the part I liked to imagine whenever I was alone in a hot shower. I looked at you and you looked at me through all that glass and distance, and I started to touch myself. I

kissed myself, the soft parts of my arms. But I knew it was really you I was kissing. It was you I was touching. It was you.

Eddie crawls into my lap. His head falls on my chest. All I can think to do is put my hand there and pet him. He's so small. He weighs almost nothing, and he purrs like a dove.

It seems this will keep going.

I look out the window. There's nothing to see, no clouds above, no land below, only sky in every direction.

The End