

## Running the Air

There was a rumor that the funeral was going to be open casket.

My mother and I sat in the over perfumed backseat of a stranger's car as it pulled away from the curb outside Fresno Yosemite International Airport. I'd planned to take a cab but at the baggage claim my phone vibrated with a text: "I'm outside in a red Hyundai Sonata Uber."

The driver swung my suitcase into the trunk between an unopened package of Kirkland toilet paper and an old pair of tennis shoes.

After my mom reminded me to use the seatbelt she said, "I'm going to skip the viewing. She's my mother and I don't want to remember her like that."

"How's Jason getting to the funeral?"

She inhaled and exhaled as if participating in a yoga class cool down. "I told him he could go with us. If it's okay with you."

"Did you actually say, 'If it's okay with Sylvie?'"

She shook her head at first and then nodded, which made me wonder if my seven-year-old had learned this move from his grandmother or vice versa.

"Is Jason living with you again?"

She zipped closed the outermost pocket of the purse wedged on the seat between us. "He mostly stays over at Ricki's."

Ricki was a name I'd heard mentioned, but asking for details would only lead to my mom saying, "If you came back to Facebook you would know."

A monster truck idled loudly next to us in traffic, a National Rifle Association sticker gleaming in the window. If my thirteen-year-old son was in the car he'd announce that pro-lifer and pro-rifle are anagrams. So are funeral and real fun, I'd say.

The light turned green. The rumbling pro-rifle truck moved ahead of us.

The Uber driver listened to a podcast about how air conditioning is leading to climate change, and the hotter the planet gets, the more AC use will increase. When we got to my mom's, the AC unit she'd recently installed was running in her absence. The house didn't look like it had when I was growing up because she'd remodeled in 2007, when she planned to sell it. She'd had the popcorn ceilings removed, put in new Berber carpeting, installed stainless steel appliances, and had the outside professionally painted in a neutral tone called Tamarind. But a week after the realtor pounded the sign into the front yard my brother dropped out of his PhD program at UCLA and drove home. The linoleum was still in pretty good shape but the carpets were worn, like a much-loved stuffed animal.

In my back jeans pocket my phone vibrated with 11 new WhatsApp messages, 10 of them responses to my Uncle Wayne's all caps text making it official: "FUNERAL HOME FAMILY VIEWING 10 A.M. TOMORROW."

There was a tearful emoji posted by one of my cousins and a smiley face making a kiss from a number I didn't recognize.

"Something's happening on The WhatsApp," my mom said from the kitchen.

"Whatsapp is like Lady Gaga, no 'the.'" Jason sat next to a bright orange Bluetooth speaker on the faded microfiber couch.

"I didn't know you were here," I said to my brother.

"You look tired."

“She took a red-eye,” my mom said, before I could answer.

Jason held the speaker like a baby. “Ricki wanted to come but she can’t get off work.”

“Are they hiring at the preschool?” My mom’s voice lifted, as if Jason getting a job was a novel idea. “I’m not trying to push you into anything, but if they need someone and you’re available...”

Jason sank into the couch, the Bluetooth speaker tumbling onto the worn carpet. “Preschoolers don’t read philosophy.”

“Who exactly is Ricki?” I had to know.

“His girlfriend.”

“I thought you were gay,” I said. “Didn’t you come out five years ago?”

My mom slid something into the microwave. “Sylvie, I got the croissants you love from Costco.”

I sat down in front of the warm, deflated bread and pressed it with my fingers, exactly what I told my kids not to do.

My mom started to play Fur Elise on the piano in the den.

“Jesus,” Jason said. “It’s not even nine in the morning.”

When we were kids our mom pounded out seasonal favorites like ‘Santa Claus Is Coming to Town’ as we struggled to get out of bed for school, Jason screaming, “It’s not Christmas!” He’d slam his door, the bathroom door, and the front door. Framed photos fell off the walls, glass fragments disappearing into the thick carpet until I vacuumed them up with the moaning upright Hoover that was probably still standing in the hall closet.

The door to the garage was the only one she didn’t replace when she remodeled. I swung it open. A shiny new car was parked beside a decades-old StairMaster.

Jason scrolled on his phone, his thumb the only part of his body in motion. My mom played Fur Elise again from the beginning. I went to the bathroom and stared at my face in the same mirror I’d spoken to a hundred times in high school saying, “I’m leaving here and I’m never coming back.”

Jason was eating my croissant when I returned to the kitchen. The piano bench was empty.

“You’re driving, right?” he said.

“Why wouldn’t Mom drive?”

“Remember the last time she got a new car? Oh, right, you don’t live here. I had to drive her everywhere for about a month.”

“You could be an Uber driver,” I said in my mind because I would never say that aloud to my brother.

Our mom rolled a carry-on suitcase into the kitchen. “Sylvie, here’s the key.”

“See,” Jason said.

I sighed. “Do you have any drugs to keep me awake?”

My mom handed me an extra large bottle of Advil. It had expired so I took three, the rust colored candy coating coming off in my sweaty palm. I licked my hand because my kids weren’t there to see and say, “Ew.”

The new car was a black Rogue Sport. Jason sat in the back with his Bluetooth speaker and a large yellow Forever 21 plastic bag.

I turned to face him. “Are you wearing shorts to the funeral?”

“Shit.” He went back into the house.

My mom closed the passenger side door. She gripped two jumbo Ziploc bags, each holding four croissants, the grease already clouding the plastic.

Jason reappeared with a garment bag folded over his forearm, but he left the door to the house wide open. My mom placed the croissants on the dash and they slid onto the floor. I watched her close the door to the house and double check that it was locked.

Jason knocked on the trunk and I opened it. “What’s with the huge suitcase?” he said, settling into the back seat.

“I promised the kids I’d bring back Trader Joe’s.”

“Get them the flock of milk chocolate turkeys. Ricki bought some yesterday and we ate all four in one go.”

My mom sighed. “I hope that wasn’t your dinner.”

“I’m thirty-five years old, Mom. I can eat whatever I want.”

I was driving the same escape route I’d practiced in high school, taking the 41 to the 99. My mom gripped the Ziploc bags as if someone might try to steal them.

Jason sighed. “Remember the Khong Guan Cookie Rolls that Grandma always gave us?”

“Those and Red Vines,” I said.

“InstaCart delivers them,” Jason said.

“I like shopping for my own groceries,” my mom said.

I drove past the exits for Madera, where I hung out with a Fresno State student I met at a Pavement show my senior year of high school. He lived with his parents on two acres with an appaloosa horse who roamed the back of the property. Before I deleted my account we were Facebook friends. Our kids are the same ages but they’ve never met.

Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Team Spirit’ came on the radio.

“Can you turn off the AC?” Jason said.

My mom leaned toward the car stereo. “I’m afraid to touch the screen. There are too many options.”

Jason unbuckled his seat belt and grabbed the headrests to move up close enough to reach the controls. After a few taps on the screen the air stopped blowing through the vents.

“Put your seatbelt on,” my mom said.

Static interrupted the radio signal. Jason leaned forward to connect his phone to the car’s Bluetooth, flakes of bread falling into the cup holders, the scent of layered butter flooding the air. Sparse electronic pulses and low bass came through the speakers.

“Jason, this music’s going to make me nod off and leave my family to suffocate from air conditioner overuse.”

He sighed. “Calm down. We turned off the AC.”

My mom tightened her grip on the door handle and closed her eyes. Through the reflection of the croissant bags and the insect bodies on the windshield a billboard off the 99 declared that Jesus was coming back.

I reached for the touchscreen and turned off Jason’s playlist. In the rearview mirror I watched him press his wireless ear buds into place. My mom’s chest rose and fell in the rhythm of slumber.

The country music stations had the strongest signals, the singers making the same complaints. I tapped the scan button until I found Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers’

'Don't Come Around Here No More,' a welcome break from the affairs, drinking and abuse.

"Hey. I'm in the car." My brother pulled his ear buds free, a reminder that despite all the available technology he is a chronic user of the speakerphone.

There was crying and gasping. "My Hot Pocket caught fire in the microwave and my co-teacher had to use a fire extinguisher."

"Jesus," Jason said. "Why'd it catch fire?"

"I wrapped it in aluminum foil."

Jason shook his head. "Listen, it's not as bad as when you drove into the parking lot with a duck carcass on your windshield."

"The preschool had to be evacuated when the smoke alarms went off."

"Did a fire truck come?"

"Uh huh."

"Little kids love fire trucks."

"All the kids were bawling."

I turned up Tom Petty. My mom's eyes remained closed. The way she was breathing made it look like she was asleep but she's very good at faking it. When I'd come home past curfew in high school I'd think she was asleep until I heard her voice whisper from the hallway, "Are you still a virgin?"

"Give it up!" Tom Petty insisted.

"I'll call you when we get to the hotel. My sister is blasting music from the 80s."

Before Jason could put his ear buds back in I said, "Does she know not to use the hair dryer in the bathtub?"

We stopped at the In N Out in Modesto, halfway to Sacramento. It was lunchtime and crowded. My mom paid for our burgers and fries and milkshakes and stood in line a second time to buy Jason an In and Out T-shirt after he got ketchup on the shirt he was wearing.

By the time we checked in at the Courtyard by Marriott, my head was pounding.

"Would you like the two rooms next to each other?" the guy working the front desk asked.

Jason shook his head. "No way."

We were on the same floor, my mom and I in a double queen and Jason in a room on the other side of the elevator. I slept hard for four hours fully dressed in the bed closest to the bathroom. When I woke my feet were hot and my mom was reading the free copy of USA Today she'd taken from the lobby. The room AC was humming.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Do you hear that?" my mom said.

I stared at the popcorn ceiling and counted the sprinkler valves. If the place caught fire, would the water actually put out the flames or just buy us time to escape?

"I hear something," my mom said. "Don't you?"

I rolled out of bed and unbolted the door.

"You haven't answered any of my texts," Jason said.

"I was sleeping."

Jason stepped into the room. "Mom, is your phone turned on?"

“I turned it off. The What’sApp got too crazy with who’s bringing the red envelopes and what we need to put in them and the candies we have to have tomorrow to follow the Chinese customs.”

I pulled on my jean jacket and stepped into the bathroom, where my mom had unwrapped the tiny circle of soap provided by the hotel. I found the hair dryer and blew hot air onto my cold fingers.

Jason was lying on my bed looking at his phone when I came out.

My mom sighed. “Can you kids pick me up some hand lotion? I don’t want to have cracked cuticles at the funeral.”

Jason sat up. “Let’s go to the mall. Mom, do you want us to bring you anything?”

“No. I have some granola bars in my purse.”

At the Panda Express in the food court we stood in line behind three generations of one family, everyone from the age of two and above staring at phones.

“Grandma took me to this mall to buy school clothes,” I said.

“Nobody ever took me shopping.”

“You’d hide behind racks and push shit onto the floor.”

Jason ordered the honey sesame chicken breast. I got the eggplant tofu.

“Are you vegetarian again?” Jason said.

“You watched me eat a burger for lunch.”

“Do you mind paying?”

We sat facing each other at a table to which the chairs were physically attached. They barely swiveled.

“Are you working at the same place?” I said.

He mixed his chicken into his rice with his chopsticks and looked at me blankly.

“The Birkenstock store.”

He put a piece of chicken into his mouth, chewed and swallowed. “That was a long time ago. They couldn’t give me full-time hours.”

“Isn’t part-time better than not working?”

“Depends.”

I called my husband and kids while Jason bought hand lotion. The air outside Bath and Body Works smelled like the Uber from that morning.

My younger son added animations of kittens shedding blue tears to the screen. It was hard to tell what was going on. I saw my husband’s forehead and heard his voice say, “How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s in bed at the hotel.”

“Where are you?”

“At the mall with Jason. We just had Panda Express.”

“We had Panda today too.”

“It’s so chilly here it felt good to eat hot food”

“Did you get the eggplant?”

“Of course.”

My husband’s calm voice made me forget where I was and why I was there until Jason stood in front of me holding two shopping bags, one from Bath and Body Works and one from Hot Topic.

I slid my phone into my purse and said slowly, “How do you have money for Hot Topic but not for Panda?”

“I used a gift card.” He handed me a heather grey Green Day hoodie with a boom box graphic on it. “You’ve had goose bumps since this morning.”

I pulled the hoodie on and layered my jacket over it.

“Wait, you look like you shoplifted.” Jason tore the tag from the hood, crumpled it and threw it away. There was a possibility, however slim, that he had stolen the sweatshirt. But he wouldn’t have paid for the Hot Topic bag, and I was flooded with guilt at having the thought.

“Hot Topic reminds me of that shop on Pier 39 in San Francisco where we used to read books about The Cure and The Smiths for hours.”

“Does Hot Topic sell books?”

“Kids just look shit up on their phones now.”

“Even Ricki?”

“She’s not a kid. She’s Derek Floyd’s sister.”

I slid my hands into the fuzzy front pocket of my new hoodie, knowing after I put it through the wash once or twice, the downy feel would disappear. “How do you remember all these people’s first and last names?”

“I run into them at Target.”

“Derek knotted his girlfriend’s purse to her desk with bright red yarn in Spanish class.”

“He’s a sales manager at the Ford dealership in Clovis now.”

I pulled my hands out of the pocket. “How’d you start hanging out with Ricki?”

“She was singing ‘I Want to Know What Love Is’ at an 80s karaoke night.”

“Does she know what love is?”

Jason looked at me. “You can joke, but Ricki’s really thoughtful. She thinks about my happiness.”

The next morning my mom and I ate the lukewarm free breakfast in the hotel restaurant.

“Your ear is bleeding,” I said.

She used a Starbucks napkin from her purse to dab her neck. “I haven’t worn earrings in a while. I had to force these in.”

“Have you met Ricki?”

She nodded. “She bakes amazing oatmeal cookies. I ate seven in one sitting.”

We got dressed for the funeral and waited in the lobby for fifteen minutes before Jason appeared. He was wearing a black Bart Simpson T-shirt under a navy blue blazer.

“Are we ready for this?” he said.

“No.” My mom buttoned his blazer so only three spikes from Bart’s hair showed.

There were two cars in the parking lot at the funeral home, not counting the hearse.

“Whose SUV is that?” my mom said.

“It’s Basil’s,” Jason said. “Ten years ago I was jealous of that car.”

Basil is my grandmother’s cousin’s grandson. He moved to California from Guangzhou when he was thirty. At Christmas he gifts Coach wallets to the women in the family and Salvatore Ferragamo wallets to the guys. He works for Macy’s, his fingernails are always manicured, and I’ve never seen his bare feet.

Inside the funeral home a tall man wearing a name tag that read ‘Mel’ approached and shook my mom’s hand. Jason walked past us into the parlor.

I took a stack of the funeral programs from a podium to give to guests and gasped. My grandmother’s birth date was listed as a year into the future, as if she’d yet to be born. My mother had spent a frantic week sending proofs to me and to Uncle Wayne. How had we missed this?

There was a warm hand on my shoulder.

“It’s a misprint error on our behalf,” Mel said. His front two teeth were much whiter than the rest. “We’re printing new ones.”

My mom took a copy of the program.

“It’s okay. They’re reprinting,” I repeated.

Mel pointed to a large photo blanket hanging on the wall. “I recognize you.” There were six pictures, each of my grandma’s adult grandchildren appearing in a square as a much younger person. I’d seen my grandmother huddled under that blanket watching back-to-back episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*.

“I can’t believe this typo,” my mom said.

The funeral director rubbed his hands together. “I’ll go check on the printing.”

“Does nobody read anymore?” my mom said.

“Nobody does. So nobody but us will notice.”

We stood just inside the glass entry doors. Cars pulled into the parking lot, filling every space like in the lot at our public library, where I often left my car even when I wasn’t checking out books. Nobody would park illegally in a funeral home lot. It could be bad luck.

“Where’s Jason?” my mom said.

“He went into the viewing room.”

My mom gazed down the empty hallway.

“Somebody has to greet the guests,” I said, knowing what she was thinking.

People dressed in dark suits and dresses approached the entryway.

My mom sighed. “We’ll have to give them the programs with the typo.”

A man in a wrinkled linen suit helped an elderly woman navigate a purple walker toward the entrance. The elderly woman was surprisingly fast. The man rushed after her, pinching her purse between his elbow and his side. As they approached I held the door open. The morning October air in the Central Valley was so crisp that the heater in the funeral parlor kicked on, but I knew it would heat up later.

“I’m Marilyn,” the woman said, stopping in front of my mother.

“Thank you for coming,” my mom said.

The woman smiled. “I knew you when you were just a young girl.” She glanced at me. “Who are you?”

“I’m Sylvie, Elaine’s granddaughter, top-right on the photo blanket.”

Wayne came by. “Oh good. You’re here.”

“Of course we’re here,” my mom said. “Have they reprinted the programs?”

Wayne shook his head and pushed open the door to the men’s restroom.

Mel reappeared. I considered asking if his family owned the funeral home like the characters in *Six Feet Under* but felt that the question was too old and too late.

“Are the new programs ready?” my mom said.

“So sorry, ma’am, but the printer ran out of ink.” His voice was smooth and reassuring. I relaxed, knowing that my mom wouldn’t argue with him.

While my mom complained about the typo to one of her aunts I slipped outside where I saw my brother moving between two shrubs like a yeti. Before my mom could notice my absence I wedged myself through a gap in the landscaping better suited for cats.

Jason handed me the mushy end of a joint. I put my lips to it and inhaled as much as possible, coughing smoke into the bushes.

“The funeral director’s teeth are so white,” Jason said.

“My kids’ teeth are white like that and I’m jealous.”

He laughed. “You can get your teeth whitened.”

“Would you?”

“I use the adhesive strips when they’re on sale.”

I took the joint from my brother.

Jason patted me on my shoulder. “You and Sam used to smoke a ton in college. I wish I still had the aqua pipe you gave me.”

“The only drug I take now is Nyquil.”

“This stuff is going to feel crazy strong to you. So hold onto your butts.”

I sighed. “I miss Grandma answering the phone, ‘Hell-oh.’”

Jason laughed. “Her greeting was friendly, but she cut to the chase fast. ‘You need money?’ ‘Are you healthy?’ ‘I never see you.’”

My head was swimming enough for me to ask what I wanted to. “How did she look?”

“Good. Considering.”

I peered through the bushes toward the funeral home.

“I feel like I should have seen her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Because it’s expected.”

“Nobody expected you to move so far away. So don’t worry about expectations.”

There was a single space left in the parking lot, designated for a motorcycle, the kind of spot that gives car drivers false hope.

“Grandma doesn’t have any friends who ride choppers,” I said, but Jason was gone, the roach dead on the asphalt.

As I walked back toward the building I could see my mom and the funeral director inside. My mom was crying and the funeral director gave her the folded handkerchief out of his jacket pocket. My heart warmed. I thought about buying everyone handkerchiefs for Christmas until I realized I’d never seen one for sale anywhere and didn’t know where to buy them.

I’m not sure how long I’d been staring at them through the glass doors when my mom stepped outside and said, “Sylvie, come in and wash your hands. Any of these people could have the flu.”

In the restroom mirror I pulled a twig from my hair and dropped it into the overflowing trash receptacle. I speculated that the people whose hands I’d shaken had all washed their hands as well, or there weren’t any women in Mel’s family assigned to empty the trash.

“Are you all right?” my mom said.



I nodded.

Mel waited for us in the hall. “Please enter this way, through the family room.” He ushered us in a manner that made me think of how the Beatles escaped being mobbed by super-fans after their concerts.

Jason sat in the middle pew and I slid beside him. He smelled like a skunk. As I settled in he giggled with his eyes closed, tremors moving through the pew, but anyone looking in our direction would think he was crying.

A wall cut off our view of the people whose hands we had shaken. All we could see was the closed casket and flowers and the slideshow that had been assembled by software to transition between images of family members and my cousin’s beagles.

Basil sat on the other side of Jason, his legs crossed at the ankles, silver quarters shining in his penny loafers. Wayne and my cousins had reserved the first row pew with a crisp XL Ross shopping bag filled with canisters of Almond Roca. My cousin’s young daughter turned to me while her dad gave the eulogy and mouthed, “I’m bored.” I pulled the hotel pen and pad out of my purse and gave it to her. She wrote her phone number repeatedly, making the zeros into eyeballs with curly eyelashes. My mom passed forward a croissant.

There was too much food at the reception, aluminum trays of walnut shrimp, chow mein, roast duck, broccoli with thin slices of beef. My husband’s family’s funerals promised copious alcohol, wine, beer and spirits, with Ritz crackers, sharp cheddar and salami that disappeared before you could finish your first drink. My family forced itself to be sober and stuffed.

Uncle Wayne sat next to me. He wasn’t eating.

“How are you doing?” I said.

“Okay. Do you think it’s too warm in here?”

“No.”

Wayne’s arms were crossed over his belly that rose and fell with his breath. “In front of my mom’s open casket Jason asked me for five thousand dollars.”

Some of the walnut shrimp I’d eaten threatened to come back up, but I fought it.

“I gave it to him. Don’t tell your mom. She has enough to worry about.”

I wanted to ask what the money was for, why he gave it to Jason, if he had given him cash or a check, and if he’d given him any money before. None of these questions could be answered with a social media account. But before I could speak the only woman who’d worn a fancy hat to the funeral came over and started talking about golf.

“Thank god the Costco bakery got the dates right.” My mom handed me a butcher knife she’d found in the kitchen. I cut the cake into slices that were more or less similar in size. After every piece of cake was spoken for we put leftover beef broccoli into takeaway containers that my aunts forced people to take home.

Wayne walked over. “Jason’s not back yet?”

“Where’d he go?” my mom said.

“He left with Basil.”

My mom and Wayne had some family matters to discuss after my aunt and cousins left. They sat in Wayne’s Miata, the windows up and the car running. I checked my phone but there weren’t any messages from Jason or my husband, just a notification from Target that the cat litter I buy often had come back in stock.

Out on the steps I waved farewell to the last of the guests, most of whom I'd never met before and would probably never see again. I thought about calling Jason to ask where he was and when he was coming back but no matter how stoned he was getting with Basil he could see that the sun was going down.

I deleted three dieting apps on my phone and one for California Pizza Kitchen, even though I had a \$10 off coupon. I turned off notifications from Target.

When Basil drove his SUV into the empty lot Jason rolled down the window. "You should have come with us."

"Where did you go?" I said, though I hadn't been invited.

"Your brother didn't believe me when I told him that JCPenney still exists, so I took him to the mall to prove it."

"We just saw JCPenney last night," I said.

Jason got out of the car and swung an Apple Store bag by his side.

As soon as I braked in my mom's garage she emerged from where she'd been sleeping on the backseat and darted inside to use the bathroom.

I looked at the Apple Store bag on Jason's lap. "Are you going to pay Uncle Wayne back?"

"Of course."

"There are less expensive computers."

"I know."

His phone rang in his coat pocket. The screen was full of text bubbles. He typed a response.

"Do you want to meet Ricki?"

When I landed in LA to catch my connecting flight home and took my phone off airplane mode, two texts appeared. My mom sent a reprint of the funeral program with my grandmother's correct birth date. And Jason sent a photo of Ricki and me playing Mario Kart in her parents' living room, Ricki's hair in ponytails and my Green Day hoodie pulled over my polyester funeral dress, our eyes fixated on the giant flat screen TV as we sped through imaginary racecourses searching for the finish line.