

The Useful Doctor

“Mr. Mrs. Miss. Dr.”

Mia hovered the cursor over the pulldown menu as she considered the options under “Title.”

“That’s it?” she said aloud. She clicked and unclicked the menu as though doing so would drop down more options.

“Mrs. or Miss?” she asked her cat, whose tail curled around the edge of her laptop.

Mia set aside the mouse, rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms, and noticed the room was dark. How long had she been scrolling through websites to plan this trip? The flights were overpriced. She took a sip from her half-drunk glass of red. That was overpriced too.

She wasn’t even sure she wanted to go anymore. It was spring break, she would have only a week off, and she would barely finish her grading in time before departing. She taught overseas, four writing classes each semester to students who were still learning English let alone trying to formulate an argument in it. And she still had a supervisor. She had hoped to be through with all that after her Ph.D., and yet here she was, adjunct faculty ten years later in the same spot, earning about the same money as a manager at Starbucks, at her age, and working surely twice the hours.

But on semester breaks she could so easily explore the world from where she lived, with direct flights to what would otherwise be inaccessible places, and without a red-eye. The adventure of travel made her feel so alive... no, that wasn’t the word. She felt like *herself*, her true self, when she travelled. True, she often had to travel alone. Her university friends, tethered to their children, could never join her. They didn’t seem to travel anywhere. What was the point, then, of moving halfway around the world?

Mia returned to the glow of her laptop screen. *Mr. Mrs. Miss. Dr.* There wasn't even an 'other' option. Maybe there was something lost in translation. But these options seemed hard to translate wrong: Married or not married for women, doctor or not doctor for men. The people from this local airline were surely not imagining a female doctor, even in the 21st century. If she selected doctor, she would become unsexed, and like Lady Macbeth it made her murderous how this dilemma resurfaced everywhere. Wherever she travelled she was asked why she was traveling alone, where her husband was, how many children did she have, not do-you-have-children, but how many? It wasn't a terrible thing to be defined by others, not if those others were her circle of friends and supportive colleagues, but when those others were supposed to be a husband and children, of which she had neither, in her early 40s, it felt suffocating.

Her cat stepped across her keyboard, paws pressing keys, and with a tsk Mia lifted her off the table to set her on the floor. On the screen, Mia found that her cat had selected *Dr.*

Dr. She *was* a doctor. Okay, a Ph.D. In literature. She never selected the *Dr.* option on any forms. But why not? Was she at some level ashamed of adopting this title and pretending that it carried the same prestige as a medical degree?

Dr. She imagined herself on the plane: some passenger has a medical emergency, a flight attendant approaches her aisle for help, only to have her have to explain that her title, in fact, reflects a Ph.D., in literature, and that she is not a doctor in the sense that they were hoping. She would not be very useful. What a nightmare.

But still, *Mrs.*? Or *Miss*? She was definitely neither of those. But at least she was a doctor.

It was late. She yawned, could not finish her wine and poured it back into the bottle, dripping it down the side and staining the label. There was no point delaying the purchase of these tickets any longer. She left her title as doctor. She definitely was a doctor.

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The gate at the airport was crowded and the airline staff announced that the flight was full. Her ticket indicated a middle seat. And boarding group nine. Nine?

Be grateful, she thought, that you can even do this at all. A couple tried to calm a screaming child, their eyes darting around the room in helpless embarrassment. Already, a screaming child. She set her latte on her carry-on roller bag and pulled out *Sister Carrie* from her tote bag. The paper cover of the 500-page novel had partially tore. Why did she feel compelled to read it? A sense of obligation, she suspected. Duty to her field.

The staff announced the flight was to begin boarding and passengers crowded around the gate. She chose not to join them, especially given the slim chance of finding overhead room for her carryon, in boarding group nine. Why fight it. She opened her book. She read. She learned that *Sister Carrie* was *pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period*. 500 pages of this. She took a deep breath.

The staff announced final call. She rolled her bag to the agent scanning the tickets. They made her check her carry-on below the plane, of course, and the queue of passengers down the jet bridge seemed interminable. At the plane door, Mia presented her ticket to the flight attendant, who pointed her down the aisle to her seat, as though there were any other way to go. People ahead blocked the aisle as they seemed to prolong sliding their carryons in the overhead compartments, just so. Mia glanced at the cockpit. Both pilots were men. As she waited she counted in the first-class area. Sixteen seats, completely full. All men. No: there in the corner of

first class, one woman, dressed like a Western expat, wearing a ring and, predictably, talking to a man sitting next to her. All the flight attendants were women. She imagined herself back in 1950 doing the same exercise, counting all the men, counting all the women serving men.

In her row, a husky man sat in the aisle seat with thick legs that squeezed against the arm rests. He suggested that she climb past him to get to the middle seat. British, she detected from his accent, and not of the polite sort, more like the colonial type who felt he should have been in first class by virtue of nothing. She declined, asked him if he wouldn't mind stepping into the aisle to let her in, which he did with look like he had water splashed on his face. At the window, another man had slumped back asleep and was already sprawling into her space. She slipped into the row and sat, pressing her legs together and tucking her elbows into her sides so as to not touch either of these men. She felt small.

There were no video screens. As the plane taxied along the tarmac, the cabin crew performed the safety demonstration like some ancient ritual to the gods. Mia watched with fake interest and made a mental note of the emergency exits, as requested. Minutes later the plane rolled down the runway, accelerated, and jostled its way into the sky. It broke through a low layer of clouds to sunlight and towering cumulonimbuses that soared higher than Mia could see through the window of the row in front of her. The man next to the window in her row had shut the shade and was snoring. What a waste of a window seat. The husky man on the aisle still had his elbows on both armrests.

The setting sun cast pinks and reds upon the clouds. Mia mentally practiced the sequence after landing: Disembark, shuffle through customs, present her visa, get cash, brace herself for the gauntlet of harassing taxi drivers outside the airport. Soon she would face the unknowns and trials of yet another developing country as a solo woman traveler. She panicked. Why did she do

this to herself? Was it possible she was no longer excited about this trip? But then she was reminded that she went through this same exercise on every flight to a new country, with the same minor panic. Every time things worked out fine. She never regretted a trip on the flight back.

Mia heard a shout from the back of the plane, and several passengers turned their heads. Mia did too, as did her seatmate, but she saw nothing. A flight attendant ran down the aisle from the front of the plane to join another who hovered over a seat about ten rows back. Some faces of the other passengers looked frightened. Her seatmate barked a nervous laugh and said, “not my problem.” Mia wondered what exactly the problem was but turned to face forward in her seat. It was none of her business. At least she and her seatmate could agree on that.

She opened her book. The same flight attendant who had run back now returned briskly toward the front of the plane, shoes pounding the aisle. She reappeared several rows ahead of Mia reading a sheet of paper in her hands with great concentration. She bent down to speak to someone.

Mia’s eyes scanned the words of *Sister Carrie* but she wasn’t registering anything. Further back she saw the other flight attendant still hovering over that same row. Ahead, the flight attendant had returned to the sheet of paper in her hands. She stopped two rows ahead of Mia and squatted to speak to someone in that row. Mia could not hear much of the conversation, except for a man who spoke loudly to say “yes,” and “cardiologist.” Mia heard more mumbling. The flight attendant stood with her mouth pressed back in some combination of a wince and a smile. She consulted the sheet of paper again, then walked two rows down to Mia’s.

“Stewardess,” the man sitting on the aisle seat said with his finger pointed in the air. “Can I get a Coke?”

The flight attendant checked the row number printed on the overhead compartments, consulted her paper, then looked directly at Mia. “You are a doctor?”

“No,” said the man on the aisle seat. The flight attendant locked her eyes on Mia, who looked at her seatmate on the aisle, then at the man slumped next to her in the window seat, before returning to the flight attendant’s gaze and pointing to herself in confusion.

“You are...” the flight attendant said glancing at her sheet of paper, “Dr. Mia...” She had a thick accent and appeared to struggle with Mia’s last name.

Mia didn’t know what to say. Was this not her nightmare?

“Your ticket says you are a doctor.”

“Yes,” Mia said. “I did put that down. I’m sorry. I’m not a medical doctor. Is everything okay?”

“What kind of doctor?”

The question threw her off. It felt personal. “Literature,” Mia answered defensively. But then, she wasn’t going to teach anybody anything about the types of doctors in the world. She softened. “I’m a doctor of literature.” The flight attendant’s eyes brightened. “Ph.D.,” Mia continued as though to clarify. “Doctor of philosophy.”

The flight attendant leaned over and spoke to Mia in confidence. “May I speak to you?” she said, gesturing toward the aisle. Mia stood, squeezed past the knees of her seatmate, and stepped into the aisle.

The flight attendant spoke to Mia in a low voice. “We have a situation. There’s a passenger who is sick. Can you help us?”

Mia wasn't sure the woman understood. It was clear that English was not her first language. "You must be mistaken," Mia said. She gestured toward the cardiologist. "There's a medical doctor right there."

"It's urgent," the flight attendant said. "Please."

She led Mia down the aisle. The other passengers turned toward her with faces of curiosity and concern and perhaps even awe, as though Mia had the talent or the skills to handle whatever was happening. Mia's face tightened and eyes widened as she shook her head to answer them all, "no." Ten rows back, the other flight attendant was hovering over a young man in the aisle seat in a row that was otherwise empty, as though the flight attendants had moved him to the one empty row or the passengers who were sitting next to him had left out of discomfort. The young man was breathing heavily, his elbows on his unfolded seat tray and a hand over his face. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Did you mean maybe a psychiatrist?" Mia asked the flight attendant. "Or a therapist?"

"What do you mean?" the flight attendant said with impatience. "Look! The heavy breathing. The hands in the face. The groans. And of course the paper."

The young man was slouched over a sheet of paper torn out of a notebook, the fray dangling off its edges. Mia saw words, some scratched out, and a cheap plastic pen, broken and leaking ink, resting on top. A tear dropped onto the page, blending into the pool of ink.

He muttered something, and the flight attendant beckoned Mia closer to listen.

"I can't do it," he sobbed. "She... she..." His breathing accelerated now to hyperventilating and he couldn't finish his sentence.

“Breathe,” the flight attendant said as she reached under his tray to rummage through the seat pocket to find an airsickness bag. She shook it open and instructed him to breathe into it. He did. It seemed to calm him a bit.

Mia now understood. The tear-stained paper, the broken pen, the scratched-out words. He was sick, it was true. The flight attendant turned to Mia. “Please,” she said.

Mia leaned over the man from her position in the aisle and put a hand on his shoulder. “Excuse me,” she said. “Can I see what you have?”

The young man choked on another sob. “It’s...,” he said, followed by more tears, then, “I can’t do this!”

“Just show it to me,” Mia said as she tugged gently at the paper that was trapped under his elbows. The young man lifted his arms enough to let Mia slip it out from underneath.

The first word on the page was “Roses.” Mia cringed. She read further. It was unmistakable. A love poem. He was writing a love poem. But the threadbare metaphors. The adverbs. And the rhymes. She kept a neutral face.

A flight attendant tapped her on the shoulder and whispered. “We’re not even close to another airport. The pilot said an emergency landing could be dangerous.”

Mia nodded. “I’ll need a pen, a fresh sheet of paper, or a notebook if you have it, a cup of coffee, some soft tissues, and a blanket and pillow.” One of the flight attendants ran up the aisle toward the front of the plane.

“Can you stabilize him?” the other flight attendant asked.

Mia nodded, but without full confidence.

“Can you?” the flight attendant repeated, now desperate.

Mia nodded again. “Yes,” she said. “I can do this.” She turned to the young man. “Would you mind scooting over?”

The man slid to the middle seat and Mia took the aisle seat as the other flight attendant returned with a tray.

What would a doctor say? Mia smiled. “You’re going to be fine,” she said to the young man as the flight attendant handed her a pen. “Just fine.”

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