

## Flight of the Rednecks

“Sir, I’m happy to get you another drink, but you are going to have to please try to be quieter for our other passengers.” The flight attendant with the blond hair bun and a nametag that read “Molly” gestured at Adalina’s children in the row ahead.

“Yeah, yeah,” the redneck said, “just bring the drink, darlin’.”

The flight attendant Molly did a double take, frowned and started off down the aisle to the cabin kitchen, evidently more or less used to dealing with rude passengers. Adalina, even as a New Yorker, could not believe her ears. The redneck’s redneck friend thought this, like everything else since take-off, hilarious, and his scrunched up face gave the impression that he really was trying to contain his laughter.

Adalina was not in the mood for loud rednecks. She was not in the mood for Italy. She was not in the mood to be travelling alone with kids, without her ex-husband, keeping track of passports and dealing with rental cars. She was not in the mood to drink, to see her sick grandmother Nonni, who, if she was honest with herself, would ideally die while Adalina was there, since she was not sure she could afford another trip back for a funeral. She wanted sleep, if it would come. She stared at the blank screen on the back of the seat in front of her. She thought she could feel a cold coming.

They were barely two hours in.

Molly the flight attendant with the blonde bun brought the men another half dozen miniature bottles of Jack Daniels. Adalina could watch them out of her periphery if she tilted her heads towards her kids, who sat together from her across the aisle, while she sat in the edge of a middle row. Indeed, it seemed unlikely she would be getting any sleep on this flight; she had a

bad feeling about these rowdy adults sitting behind her obviously more mature children. Molly took her time placing ice in fresh cups for the men, and each time she would turn back to her cart, the redneck in the aisle would make a mock go at squeezing the air around her bottom. Then, when she looked back around, he'd withdraw his hand in a half-ass attempt not to get caught. Molly pretended not to notice as she handed out the miniatures. Standing up straight, she said sweetly, "Remember gentlemen, please keep your voices down."

"Bitch," the aisle redneck said, not quite under his breath, but this too Molly, already scooting her cart up the aisle, seemed not to hear. Adalina whipped her head around and shot them a dirty, disbelieving look. Seeing this, the men pointed at her and burst out in another round of their raspy, voiceless smoker's laugh, which sometimes ended in a violent cough. Adalina's cheeks flushed red; she turned back to her blank screen and dug her nails into the back of her hand. She was not in the mood to get into a confrontation, especially in front of her kids. She wished the rednecks would just watch a movie and shut up. Staring forward, she could hear one hock up a loogie and spit, though she did not want to know where.

Mars and Mary were behaving well; in truth, plugged into a computer or an electronic screen was likely how they'd be spending their time anyway, were they at home and not 30,000 feet in the air. Mars was the older child at fourteen. His father had always been fascinated with the planet and with the Roman god of war. During his birth Mars had been nearly strangled by the umbilical cord. When it was all over, Adalina had been so happy he was alive and well, she did not care, after her months of protesting the name, what they called him in the end. Of course, through the years anytime Adalina had to reveal to other moms and teachers the name, which sounded like one a popstar would give her newborn, she got the *are you kidding?* look. So two

years later, when her daughter was born, dropping an “s” and adding a “y” seemed like a simple way to compensate.

She flipped through a SkyMall absentmindedly, wondering how her kids would hold up if they did have to attend a funeral after all. They had known Nonni in their youths from sporadic trips to her villa outside Naples throughout their childhood. She doubted whether they felt very close, if they ever did. Perhaps she didn't think it possible because Adalina herself no longer felt close to Nonni. It had been since she was a teenager that she enjoyed playing or working in her farm, helping her in the kitchen or attending the never-ending trips to Mass. That all seemed part of a past life, and she had never expected Nonni to embrace her new one, her atheism, to inquire about her corporate job or the constant Thai take-out filling up the kitchen trash can.

But Mars and Mary loved getting out of the city and spending a week at Nonni's, even without their electronics. They loved hearing about how kids entertained themselves in Nonni's youth, how a simple stick in the grass became a whole array of toys and props befitting imaginative storylines that they would act out. Mars and Mary played hide and seek in the hilly expanses between the neighboring villas with the neighboring kids, they rolled gnocchi and accompanied Nonni begrudgingly to Mass. It was possible they felt closer to Nonni than Adalina ever had, but after so much time, it was hard to tell.

And then, with a flutter of panic, Adalina wondered how much she had actually impressed on Mars and Mary about Nonni's current state. She had told them she was ill; were they expecting their typical getaway? So far their closest encounters with death were in their video games and movies. Adalina was not in the mood for a funeral.

Yet, looking at them now, smiling contently at their movies, she decided she would have to talk to them before they arrived.

An hour passed, by the end of which the sky was streaked in the hot pink and deep indigos of a cloudy sunset, and the flight attendants were clearing dinner trays and coming around with coffee and tea. Adalina stared out the window and let her thoughts pass her by.

The aisle redneck stopped Molly in her path, gripping her arm lightly. “Be a darlin’ and round us up another drink to wash down that bullcrap y’all call supper,” he said.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Molly replied, pulling her arm away, “but I’m afraid I’ve reached the maximum amount of drinks that I can serve you on this flight.”

“What?” said the aisle redneck. “That’s horseshit,” said the window redneck. Adalina, annoyed, briefly wondered if there was a semantic difference between “horseshit” and “bullcrap.”

“Again, sir, I am sorry for the inconvenience. I am happy to bring you a bottle water if you are thirsty, but the kitchen is now closed--”

“Aw, fuck off lady,” said the window redneck.

“Excuse me?” said Molly, horrified. Adalina sat up in her seat and turned to the scene, ready to get involved. Judging by Molly’s expression she had never been trained to deal with a customer who was being outright hostile.

“You’d let us get drunk as we wanted if we were sat up in fancy first fuckin’ class,” said the other.

“Ain’t that the sad truth,” the first echoed.

“Mom?” said Mars. He and Mary had unplugged from their screens and were sitting forward in their seats, turned, like many on the plane, to see what the yelling was about.

“I-I’m sorry sir, but I’m afraid we can’t allow you to have any more at this point...”

“Just watch the movie sweetie,” Adalina said, raising her eyebrows at them when they did not immediately turn back around.

Molly seemed stuck still. The aisle redneck leaned close to her in a slow, deep voice, said, “Lady just do us a favor and go on an’ fetch us one more goddamn round. It ain’t a tough job.”

Molly walked off, and with that Adalina turned back around. With the whiskey possibly cut off, the men were no longer laughing. “Piece of shit airline,” he could hear them murmuring.

Adalina had an idea, and she turned the light bulb on above her head, fully appreciating its symbolism. Molly the flight attendant arrived a moment later.

“Yes,” Adalina said, smiling a little mischievously. “I’ll have two cans of Pringles, two apple juices, and one,”--she said, winking stupidly-- “jack and coke.”

Adalina smiled at Molly, sure that she would see the humor and potential for a little payback now in reach. At the mention of whiskey Molly frowned and shot a furtive glance to the rednecks behind her, but jotted down the order on a pad and walked off, saying nothing to Adalina.

“Miss, excuse me, miss--our drinks?” said the aisle redneck as she retreated, and when she did not respond he had to yell “Miss! I’m talking to you!” extremely loud, so she had no choice to return to him.

“As I told you before, sir, we are not able to offer you any more alcohol at this time. However, we are nearly in Rome, where there are bars and duty free stores located in the airport.” Molly swept briskly off down the aisle, ignoring the men. Adalina began to wonder if her plan was such a good one after all.

To her surprise, though, Molly did not return with a drink, but a tall, handsome man did, one who must have been working at another part of the cabin. He smiled and lowered the items onto her fold-out tray; she took them and handed her children their snacks. The tall attendant’s name tag read “Roberto.”

“Thank you, Roberto,” she said, as he turned around. Looking over her shoulder, she watched the aisle redneck open his mouth to get Roberto’s attention, but he seemed to think better of it. “Where is that shitty ass waitress?” he said to the other.

Now Molly sat up and turned to face the rednecks as much as she possibly could without her legs being in the aisle. The aisle redneck noticed her looking at them; he nudged the other. They watched as she took the can of coke in both hands and made a show of popping it open and pouring it slowly into her glass. Then she procured a Jack Daniels from her right side and brought it into sight, twisted off its cap, smelled it, wafted its aroma towards her nostrils, and (resisting the urge to cough back the strong scent of alcohol), smiled sweetly at the rednecks as she poured it over the ice and the coca cola. She stirred and sipped, then raised a glass up into the air, but mock-realizing they had nothing to toast with, shrugged, smiled again and simply sipped more. Then men looked expressionless as they watched, stupefied. She turned back to face front, half afraid she would be clobbered in the side of the head. There, Molly could be seen standing

by the kitchenette, watching, smiling; then, catching Adalina's eye, she winked and turned the corner into the kitchenette.

Adalina thought she could make out the words "kitchen" and "closed" from the grumbling behind her, but she did not dare turn back around. "Fuck this," she heard the aisle redneck say. "I gotta take a piss." Adalina made to look over at her kids.

The aisle redneck grabbed the back of Mary's seat and seemed to pull it back hard as possible in his effort to sit up, letting it go so that it sprung Mary back forward in her seat. Distracted from her show, Mary pulled out her earphones and turned irritably around. Now the redneck stretched his arms out wide and stuck his large plaid-claden belly out, which was emphasized all the more by his huge brass belt buckle that made his gut protrude all the more (something Adalina could not imagine comfortable on an eight hour flight). This seemed only to push Mary's seat forward all the more, so that when he stopped stretching the seat sprung back to its original stance. Then the redneck did a side stretch, pushing the seat forward again; then the other side, pulling it back. Having not thought that the men would actually begin to bother her kids, Mary was determined at first to pay it no mind.

"Just ignore them, the flight's almost over," she told Mary when the redneck behind him finally went to the restroom.

But when he came back, to his friend's delight, he decided to start poking at the screen on the back of Mary's seat, poking with such force that each thrust was a bump in Mary's back, like a seatback being kicked at the movie theater. It took only a few moments for Mary to pull out her headphones again, confused and irritated.

“Excuse me,” said Adalina to the aisle redneck, leaning over the aisle space, “you need to cut that out.”

The redneck, perhaps not realizing Adalina would be so direct, “merely kept thrusting his finger at the screen.” His friend held back giggles like a kid during church service. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Is my Solitaire bothering you somehow?”

“You can cut that out now, or I can call the flight attendant over,” she insisted.

“Are we doing something wrong? Are we going to be put in plane time-out?” the window redneck chimed in. They burst out together in another round of hoarse laughter, bunched over in a fit.

Whiskey pulsed through her insides, firing her up. The redneck’s finger-jabbing had not relented. Max and Mary were looking at her anxiously.

Adalina stood up wordlessly. Towering as tall as she could over the stocky redneck, she swatted his finger away from the screen before it could push Mary’s seat forward once more. Leaning in close to the man as outrage formed on his face, she said in a low whisper, “Stop harassing my child. Or I will be reporting you to the police. And I’m telling you once.”

“We’re not harassing any children, lady, so you can sit your tight ass back down and let me play my game,” said the redneck, and he went back to thumping the screen.

Adalina reached over the redneck’s head and pushed his call button. She had had enough.

“You know,” she said shakily. She could feel everyone watching as she stood, now nearly screaming, tears welling in her eyes, in the middle of the aisle. “We are going to see my very sick, very ill, dying grandmother, who could be dead by the time we land--dead!...Do you think you could have just a scratch more respect and leave us--everyone--in peace for the last,



what, hour of the flight?” she said, dramatically checking her watch. “Would that really be so hard for you?”

“Oh now ma’am I’m sure my friend here wasn’t trying to be disrespectful,” said the window redneck, and he brought a cigarette to his mouth and lit it.

“Mommy,” interrupted Mary. “Did Nonnie die?”

Adalina ignored her, eyes widening. “What do you think you are doing? It’s illegal to smoke on a plane! Are you *trying* to kill us all?”

“I’m scared, Mommy.”

“Put that out,” yelled a man from the row behind the rednecks. “Oh my god is he insane?” one woman asked.

“There’s nothing to be scared of, honey,” said Adalina. “We’ll talk in a minute.” Molly and the tall attendant Roberto were making their way down the aisles.

“Excuse me, I’m afraid you’re both going to have to come with me,” said Roberto, looking down where they now sat seeming somehow smaller than before.”

“I ain’t doing shit with your faggy ass,” said the aisle redneck.

Molly turned to Adalina, who still stood in the aisle. “We’ve got this miss, you can return to your seat--”

*WHAM*

Suddenly Adalina was no longer standing above her seat, but lying down the aisle some distance from it. There was a sharp pain in her lip and on the right side of her head. She raised her head, not sure what had just happened. People were screaming; Mary cried “Mommy” over the sudden uproar. Looking over, Molly the flight attendant was struggling to stand up, but

seemed to bear a great weight on her back. Indeed when Adalina struggled to lift herself up, it was with great effort that she was finally able to begin crawling back up the aisle. People looked on at her, horrified at what was happening, as she crawled against the upward slope of the still-diving plane. Hot liquid trickled down her cheek. “Mommy, you’re bleeding,” Mars yelled.

“I know, honey,” she said. Oxygen masks had fallen from the cabin ceiling. Ignoring protocol she quickly tightened Mary’s and Mars’ masks before climbing into her seat and doing her own. Where were the flight attendants? Molly was making her way to her seat so that she could fasten in. Roberto was already out of sight.

Adalina’s chest was in a knot. She couldn’t tell if she was breathing or not. She leaned across the aisle, holding Mary’s hand, holding Mars’. “It’s fine,” she told them, terrified, “It’s just some mechanical trouble. It will be better in a little bit.”

“Mommy are we dying?” Mary asked.

“No, sweetie. No. We’re not dying. Everything is going to be ok, OK?” Adalina wiped Mary’s tear away and tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Why are you crying, Mommy?” asked Mars, his eyes poking behind the yellow plastic attached to his mouth.

Adalina hung her head and sobbed. She thought of her ex-husband, how she should have left the kids with him. She thought of their family vacations to the mountains in Montana. She thought with hatred of Italy and Nonni, that all their lives would end because Nonni’s was ending too. She thought of 9/11, of the Malaysian Airlines flight. Were they being hijacked? Would they ever be found? She thought finally, this is what it feels like, to be helplessly crashing through the sky in a plane, to be dying. She looked up and down the aisles again for anyone

moving about. If there were a terrorist they could do something about it; it wasn't too late. But only Molly was visible down the aisle, strapped into her kitchenette chair, head thrown back and eyes snapped shut like she had been forced to go on a scary rollercoaster.

Then, somehow, in all the velocity of the careening mass beelining towards Earth, Adalina kissed Mary's hand and felt a stillness, a deep calm. What was happening was happening and she could not do a thing about it, which left her oddly freed. Or perhaps it was a last defense mechanism, some form of denial.

The rednecks never did rise from his seat, and now Adalina remembered them, and looked back in her miserable calm. The redneck in the aisle was already looking at her. He was pressed as far back in his seat as he could go, grabbing tight onto the armrest with white knuckles. His expression was petrified in place, suddenly innocent and soft. The brown of his eyes, it seemed, could not turn away from Adalina's. Meanwhile his friend in the window seat had his eyes shut tight and turned away from the uncovered window, his hand clutching his friend's knee, unthinking and terrified; between his fingers the cigarette, still lit, was beginning to form a long column of ash. Adalina could not tear her eyes away from the redneck in the aisle, hidden behind his oxygen mask; she wondered where his mother was.

"Mommy, what is happening," said Mars. "Are we falling, Mommy."

"Shhh," said Adalina. "We're almost there."

Adalina closed her eyes. She was not sure she'd be able to open them again. "Mommy," she could hear. "Mommy." It was all over, she thought. It was all over.

But then something changed. The plane began to straighten out. Adalina, if not mistaken, could feel her legs being pushed up from their undersides. Her intestines seemed to be settling

back into place. She could breathe a little easier. She dared to open her eyes. As if a joke, the cabin chimed and the “fasten seatbelts” sign lit up across the ceiling.

Adalina lifted her head and looked at her children, who were craning their heads to get a better look at the recovering cabin. “Huh,” she half-grunted, half-laughed to herself. Placing her hand to her chest, her heart was hammering, but looking around, she allowed herself to exhale more fully.

*Good evening ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are very sorry to have disturbed your flight. Unfortunately, not everything about flying can always be predicted, and what you just experience was just such an occurrence. As it turns out, coming directly towards us in our flight trajectory was another commercial flight, and as you might have guessed we had to maneuver very sharply, very quickly into a dive to avoid collision. While this is a rare occurrence, it does happen, and this is why it's important to always follow the safety instructions outlined in the safety manuals in your back seat pocket, to the best of your abilities. Again, we deeply apologize for this inconvenience. If anyone needs medical attention, please alert our flight attendants straight away. We should be landing shortly in...*

“LORD have mercy,” said the window redneck. “LORD what did we ever do.”

“My God,” said the aisle one, “I about nearly pissed myself.”

“I think I might did,” said the other.

“Lord,” said the aisle one. Adalina took a deep breath, still reeling and trying to calm herself. She wiped blood from her temple with her hand.

“I wish they'd give us a drink now,” said the other. “After that,” said the aisle one, and it was starting, “Lord, I was just thinking the same--” but the redneck couldn't even finish his

sentence, already breaking down into a laughing fit as he was. Within seconds it was full on, hysterical laughter that had them bent over clutching their stomachs, practically in tears. Mars and Mary, when she looked at them through blurry vision, were giving Adalina a curious smile. She realized then, wiping away another tear as Molly hurried past, that she was still alive, her kids were alive, she was smiling, her stomach was hurting; she couldn't control herself; she had begun laughing, too. They were still going to see Nonni, who was sick and dying, and all she could do was laugh.