

## Paper Airplanes

It wasn't a measured strategy, my confession to Angelo in the hallway, class still in session.

Inside was chaos, kids raised by wolves with no idea how to stop blurting, and outside, in the hall, sequestered and alone, Angelo finally listened.

I told him about the plane crash, about how it changed my life. About how it saved me. But I worried I'd given him ammunition, so I was agitated.

Class ended and I put it out of my head.

Later that evening the memory came back. I was on the floor with my back against the sofa, looking through the mail and drinking a glass of scotch. The plastic bin—pre-shredder purgatory for junk mail—was against the opposite wall. This is my afternoon ritual. If something looks important, I open it; if not I fling it across the room, thwack, against the wall and let it drop into the bin. On Fridays I have two scotches, or three, and shred.

Believe it or not, I still anticipate mail the way I did in the nineties, when Steve used to write to me. Sheets of paper—physical paper, touched by his hands. Steve was in college in St. Louis while I had stayed in Boston. His letters were sweet, often apologetic. On the phone, we spent so much time whining, accusing, or masturbating, that my grades suffered. I don't know if his did, but I imagine they must have. Or maybe it was only me who carried the trauma of our relationship around, into classes where there would be some little professor and a blackboard down at the bottom of a lecture hall and I'd be gazing out the high windows or doodling Steve's name with loopy S's and hearts for E's. He'd cheated. I'd threatened. And worse. Over and over, he'd break it off or I'd break it off. A nice letter would arrive. And repeat.

Now most of my mail is addressed to either me or the current resident; the sender isn't picky, so long as someone with a wallet opens it.

An offer of bonus miles brought it back. The vague humiliation had remained, the way feelings sometimes do, detached from what causes them. But the silvery airplane embossed over the return address reminded me. The airplane dive-bombing in my imagination and me telling Angelo. I tried to ease my shame by reminding myself that it was a risk. Administrators encourage us to take risks. That's not what they mean, of course. They think taking a risk means assessing with a new app or letting kids use their phones for something "educational." Real risk is personal, maybe a little dangerous.

"I'm here for a reason," I'd said.

I didn't expect to say that. It just came out. I was being driven by something bigger than myself, bigger than Angelo and the other kids. I'd handed over the reins.

When I started teaching, I had visions of fruitful discourse, opening minds, and being an inspiration to kids, but I was starting to realize that I actually hated it. Not to say that I hated teaching, just all the quote-unquote behavior control that goes with it. And the jumping-through-hoops that goes with it, teaching to get them to pass the stupid test. Assessing their every breath to justify my existence. The holy grail of every assignment being a good rubric to stave off the ire of parents.

To be honest, I don't think I'm very good at the whole thing, and for whatever reason, it felt as though things were coming to a head. I had to shit or get off the pot, as my dad used to say. Dig in and be happy or look for a new career.

I'd always thought Angelo's eyes were the color of a dehydrated person's urine, a trickle of pee

after wandering the desert.

On the day in question, he'd nudged some poor kid's backpack, derailing my lesson.

I stayed calm, my face a mask of concern suffocating the scream I felt inside. "I'm here for a reason." I looked into his eyes and paused. They're actually the color of a stone at the bottom of a river. The thick, clean slime that coats things down there.

His head jerked slightly, like it wanted to pull away and drag the rest of his body. But he stayed. I was the kid-whisperer. I went on: "I might have been killed. When I was a little older than you are. I was supposed to be on a plane and it crashed. Do you understand? I was saved and so there must have been a reason for it."

Nobody survived. And where was I? In a split-second that I didn't fully comprehend, I'd stepped off the Blue Line at Government Center and walked all the way back to my dorm on Comm Ave. I about-faced at least ten times, looking at my watch repeatedly, gauging whether I could still make it to the airport, breaking into a run, my backpack bouncing against my ass, changing my mind again, lingering, faltering, until finally, it was too late.

My roommate Mary and I saw it on the breaking news that interrupted *Oprah*.

"Holy shit," Mary said as I grabbed the boarding pass off the desk, the flight numbers matching. "What are the chances of that?" We watched the replay of the burning aircraft, the newscaster in the foreground with her bulbous mic.

Mary's jaw hanging off of her face looked grotesque.

"Close your mouth," I told her. I guess that kind of comment was probably what made her request a new roommate for sophomore year.

I called Steve.

“Oh my god. You’re not on it?” First he sounded relieved, then pissed.

“I, I missed it.”

“And you were going to tell me this. When?”

“Soon. I’m telling you now.” I was distraught. He’d thought I’d died. It felt like I was letting him down by being alive.

“Why did you miss the flight?”

“I was ... watching Oprah?”

He reminded me that he had bought vanilla candles for his dorm room. His roommate was away, and he had planned on bringing me to a football game on Saturday night. And all of that made me regret my decision. But, I was alive! Me! Cherie! The only one! And couldn’t we do it another weekend?

“Cher, maybe we should just forget it. Okay?”

“You’re right,” I said. I wanted to hang up on him, but he got there first. I guess if I’d stayed with him, I’d be dead. But that’s not the way I ever thought about it.

Sometimes I replay the news program, see the spotty fire across some fields near the Catskills, imagine the moments before as if I were in the plane—stringy oxygen masks dancing their upside-down party of doom. On the outside, the wing catching the low rays of the sun as it dipped, gathering speed, rolling, the sun becoming a strobe light.

And I’d think, I was saved for some reason. It could have been the other way, me haunting Steve forever, etched into his consciousness as a true love. I wonder how that would’ve affected him? How could anyone ever compete with my memory? But I didn’t think about that either. I only thought I must have some job, some reason for being alive—which seemed absurd considering some of the people who died on that plane: a physicist from MIT, a priest, a mother

without her children. Why me?

So I started thinking, well, how can I live a life with meaning? For the mother, the priest, the physicist. The others. I thought I should make some kind of a mark. I forgot all about Steve.

And then, some years passed. I won't mention the number; it's depressing. And along came cheeky Mark Zuckerberg and his Facebook. Steve and I became *friends*. I scrolled through pictures of him, his wife, and their three daughters—often in matching outfits.

His eldest wears glasses and does gymnastics. Claire. The middle, Christine, sings in the chorus. The youngest is Caroline, and she's in pre-K. Bethany, his wife, tags Steve in photos of the children's artwork: girls with stick legs in triangle dresses. Santa with a beard of cotton ball.

Yes, all three girls' names begin with C. So does mine. Coincidence? I didn't think so.

Angelo in the hallway. What did I think was going to happen? That he'd kneel at my feet, apologize for making stupid jokes, playing the app that emits a high-pitched noise that no one over thirty can hear, tossing Skittles and half-pencils over the heads of his classmates and missing the trashcan? Was I going to reform him so easily?

Of course I didn't expect that, so imagine my surprise when he showed up to class with his homework done and sat still for the entire 53 minutes, didn't lob a single thing or roll his eyes or tie his shoelace to the leg of his desk. Which isn't to say that class was all that much easier: other members of the herd were in high form, as usual.

I stopped him after class, put my hand on his forearm. I dropped it quickly though. It was a step too far. For me, anyway. He didn't seem to mind. We waited for the other students to shuffle out. One of his friends fired a wad of crumpled paper at the side of his head, but he ignored it.

We were left standing on chalk dust and plastic disposable pencil husks like some post-apocalyptic academic disaster.

“What I said,” I began. “I just wanted you to know that I said it, I said it because, I just wanted to help you see—”

On his face I could see something much more grownup than I’d expected. He was smiling in a sort of bemused way. Not sarcastic. Lovingly? Like one of my parents? “I don’t know why I said it,” I said. “Never mind.” I went back to my desk, but Angelo was rooted. After I’d sat down at my computer, he said, “No, it was cool. See you tomorrow, Ms. Ross.” And then he left.

It’s not the first thing I’ve done like this. With Angelo—doing something a little off. Here are a few other examples:

I brought a can of IPA in my lunchbox not too long ago, and drank it with my kale salad in the lunchroom. Nobody even noticed! I should have brought a Budweiser if I was trying to be noticed. But I wasn’t, you know? I don’t think I wanted anyone to notice. I was smoothing mayonnaise on bread in the morning and when I went to grab the sliced turkey from the fridge, my hand skimmed the beer can and it was a compulsion I couldn’t disobey. It was Friday and I wanted a beer with lunch.

And my makeup. Cotton-Candy eyeshadow, Alexander-the-Grape lipstick. I paint it on in the morning for two reasons: One, I do like to look good. And young. And the pink on my lids brings out the blue in my eyes. I remind myself of a white rabbit. And two, because I don’t want to disappear into the burlap rubble of the high school. I want to stand out and I want to be found. I’m staking a claim.

Also, I had been swearing during class. Fucking this and fucking that, and fuck off. I did

it to make them laugh, and to get them to stop acting out, but it had the opposite effect. It would stun them into silence, but then it opened the door for their bad behavior. So I stopped. But maybe too late.

Angelo was quiet, studious, maybe smug. It went on for days. No high-pitched noises, no trying to make his classmates laugh, no throwing things or dancing across the room, earbuds thumping with rap and him ten minutes late, interrupting instruction. I worried that he was gearing up for an attack. I'd offered him my secret, like a glowing ember, a chakra, a nugget of soul. I tried to ignore him.

A couple of weeks after Thanksgiving I felt a cold coming on and called in sick. I sat by the window for hours, watching occasional passersby three floors below, then I started scrolling through pictures of Steve's family. It had been a month since Bethany had posted a photo of the three girls and their retriever in a field of pumpkins. No new pictures of the whole family—or of her and Steve—in maybe two months. I scrolled through the older photos I'd seen a hundred times: Bethany and Steve in front of a Christmas tree, decked out in handsome holiday-wear; at the beach, the view from arm's length above their heads, the ocean lapping at the sand behind them. Bethany had a patch of pigment on her cheek, I noticed, in earlier photos that was no longer there and I wondered what other work she'd had done. I patted my own face, grateful that nature has, so far, been kind.

Steve was aging well. His face a tiny bit wizened, rougher, paler. His hair sprinkled with white at the temples, like a light snowfall had dusted him from the sides. I had friended him back in August, but we'd only waved to each other.

Bethany and Steve were much more prolific updaters before I friended him, and I thought

I sniffed trouble in paradise.

I opened messenger several times but didn't type anything.

Mid-December, Angelo started staying after school. "Do you mind if I do my homework here?"

What was I supposed to say?

He set up shop with his papers and his books, and he sometimes stayed until I was ready to go home. I'd pull my bag, stuffed with papers, plans, essays, onto my shoulder and say, "I have to lock up."

We'd walk together through the quiet hallways, the silence uncomfortable; but I didn't know what to say.

I allowed myself to be satisfied that something miraculous had occurred, that I'd actually reached him. His second quarter grade was a C+, up from a D quarter 1.

I was thinking a lot about destiny. And the long lines of our lives, the way they veer this way and that, crisscrossing each other's in unknowable and profound ways. I thought I could see under the surface, that I'd laid eyes on a universal truth, and understood it as it had flowed through me. Maybe this was it: the reason I hadn't died. No big revelatory thing, just this kid. Maybe he'd go on to cure cancer or negotiate peace in the Middle East, or something even grander, something I wouldn't even know about because I'd be dead by then. My elation got watered down immediately by the idea that, now that my life's work was done, what was there to keep me alive? What about the thirty-, forty-, or fifty-odd years I might have left? What was I supposed to do with them? So I was back to square one.

Monday before break, I was watching Angelo work, and he caught me peering around the



side of my monitor. He waved from across the room and went back to work, but I was embarrassed, and didn't want to give him the wrong idea. Something shifted.

"You can't have much to do? Angelo? It's almost Christmas break?" He finished a sentence before looking up, his pencil fairly twitching from use. His eyes drilled into me. My hand rattled the mouse.

"Just making sure I'm caught up with everything."

I got spooked. I thought something might happen between us. I don't know what did it. Self-doubt I suppose. That maybe it was all baloney and he just had a simple crush on me. I'm pretty good-looking, and I'm keeping well, despite my age. Maybe it was just that. Maybe that's all I really have going for me. The idea was wretchedly titillating. Satisfying in its own right but it spoiled the thoughts I'd been having just moments before of me being the good influence on this young man who was going to go on and save the world. I could already read the headlines, see myself in an orange jumpsuit. Would he would start visiting me when he turned eighteen? Would we get married in prison, rent a small house in the outer suburbs with white vinyl siding and a doghouse in the yard, and move into it when I was released? Would we have kids? Would I work at Walmart?

Was I going to become a predator? Would I be able to resist an advance?

Let me introduce the gnome that lives in my head. He often tells me things I don't want to hear, but sometimes he calms me down. When he whispers it tickles my earlobes. *Cherie, Relax. You're a mother figure. You're doing a good thing. Don't be scared. And anyway: Steve. Steve and Bethany have split. Steve is your true love.*

Angelo accompanied me out of the room, waited as I locked the door. About halfway

down the hall, I turned. “I left something. I’ll see you tomorrow.” I headed to the English office, determined to thwart any romantic ideas he might have about me.

I rummaged in the top drawer of my desk; I don’t even use that desk much—most of my stuff is in my classroom. But I had to make it look real. For whose sake, don’t ask me, as the door was shut and locked behind me and I was all alone. To be a good liar, you have to play it out. It’s like Daniel Day Lewis on a movie set: he never goes out of character.

Anyway, I slipped a packet of sticky notes into my pocket and went home.

I spent a few nights with my parents in Lunenburg over Christmas. I went for long walks, hoping Steve was in town. Hoping he’d see me on the side of the road, roll down the window, smile at me—his dimples deeper, white sprinkled among the stubble on his cheeks. I imagined getting into his car, driving to the Motel 6 on Route 2. That was the backdrop I’d conjure for our reunion. We’d sit on a saggy mattress and have a heart-to-heart, a really mature one, where he’d confess how much he’d always loved me. Our fights were nothing more than proof of the passion. We’d pledge ourselves to each other, and fall back onto that creaky bed. You can picture the rest.

My parents’ love felt overbearing, their concern claustrophobic. At least there was a lot of television watching in the living room, which was a welcome relief. But my mom would come to my room in the evenings, kiss me on the forehead like I was still a little kid, ruffle my hair, tell me she loved me. Concern in her eyes.

I returned to my small apartment a day earlier than planned. I said I had a lot of grading and pretended to have a bunch of friends to hang out with. My first night back, I drank scotch with Taco Bell for dinner.

There still hadn't been any movement on Steve's Facebook page, nor on Bethany's. Finally, I pressed send: "Hey Steve! How are things?"

To my surprise, and fearful delight, he responded immediately. "Hey Cherie. Good. Long time!"

And so, the evening was eaten up in a frenzy of messages. We talked about his kids, my job. Nothing about Bethany. He reminded me that I used to want to be a journalist. I chided him for succumbing to the misconception that teachers are only teachers because they failed at something else. I was thinking of Angelo and his C+, and my memory was already cleansed of the gray area, the weirdness; it was a teaching success story. A sort of miracle.

"I love my job!" I said. "And I'm never bored. Can you say that?"

He conceded the point. "I'm really enjoying this," he said. "Do you want to meet and do it in person?"

"But you live in St. Louis?" I reminded him, my heart doing more gymnastics than his daughter Claire.

"I'm going to be in Boston. For business, and I'll see my parents in Lunenburg. You'll be around? I'm really looking forward to being in Massachusetts."

"Um. Okay. Sure," I typed.

"Don't sound so enthusiastic."

"Lol" I said. "Just. You know. How are things with your wife?" And then there was a long pause. I moved away from my phone, shaking my limbs like I was trying to fling mud off of them. When I returned, there was still no message. The little green dot next to his profile had gone dark. For the next couple of days, I checked regularly, watched a lot of Netflix. On New Year's Eve I went to a party with a friend from graduate school, and ended up letting this pale-

handed suit feel me up in the corner by the bathroom. I threw up when I got home and spent New Year's Day on the sofa binging *Downton Abbey*. Then, that afternoon:

“Hey Cher. I'll be landing on Friday. Can you pick me up?”

I waited for as long as humanly possible before sending my cell number and “Text me your flight info.”

Waiting at the airport, I checked myself in the rearview. I opened the door when I saw him, but got yelled at by an officer: “Stay with your car. You'll have to move along.”

“There he is,” I said. “Keep your pants on.”

Steve trotted across, looking to the left, pulling his coat around him. He slid into the car, said, “Let's go to your place,” and stretched his arm across the back of my seat, his fingers already twined in my hair.

He talked about the project he was in town for, asked about my parents, mentioned that his brother had developed some autoimmune disease—nothing too bad, but it was chronic. I remained quiet, listened to him talk, and drove: the tunnel was backed up so I took a different route through Chelsea. The stairs to my apartment never felt so echoey. They're carpeted, but the silence as we ascended was full of contradictions: We were going to re-unite. Physically. That was the point. And to tell the truth, I couldn't wait for that. If there's anything Steve and I were good at, it was sex. But mixed with the anticipation were these strange little noises Steve was making through his nose. Tut-tutting the state of my apartment building, I thought. Or maybe I was being overly sensitive, given the storybook suburban house he lived in (I'd seen some images of the kitchen—wide marble-topped island, gleaming appliances, and the living room fireplace, big enough for a small pony).

He draped his coat over the arm of my couch, but didn't sit on it. I threw my thoughts away and showed him the bedroom. I'd shamelessly put on red-wine colored satin sheets but now I was embarrassed by them, and felt slutty.

Oh well, I thought, and went for it anyway.

The next morning, sitting at the table, showered, mugs of coffee steaming in front of us, I let myself be fooled into thinking my life was about to change. The know-it-all gnome had been right all along: We were each other's one true love. The plane crash was just a pause, and now that I'd served the purpose, saving Angelo, I could go back to Steve and start over. I started to fantasize my role as stepmom to Claire, Caroline, and Christine. Would I have to move to the Midwest?

"Remember when I missed the flight to St. Louis?"

Steve looked up from his phone, reached a hand over to my bathrobe, pushed the fabric over like he wanted a better view of my collarbone.

"Of course. And I forgive you." His smile was rather ugly, elastic lips and yellow teeth, but I ignored it.

"Anyway. I told one of my kids about that. I don't know why I did it. I wanted him to feel special, I guess."

"You don't have kids."

"Student."

"And how'd that go for you?"

"Well. It worked."

Steve laughed a little through his nose.

"Well, it did."

“That’s good.”

I refilled our cups and spread butter on toast. “So, what happens now?” I said.

“Hold on, I just have to get this.” He followed his phone into the bathroom, texting with his thumbs—the first person our age I’d seen be able to do that. I still text with one pointer finger. Or I use speech recognition.

I could hear him talk to someone behind the bathroom door, but I couldn’t get a sense of whether it was personal or professional.

“Hey,” he said when he came out. “I have to run. You around tomorrow?”

I closed my eyes when we kissed goodbye. I was still in my bathrobe and he grabbed a chunk of my butt like I was garlic bread.

I waited all day.

“Hey you,” I wrote, finally, the next morning.

After several minutes, he texted back. “I feel terrible,” he said. “I can’t do this,” he said. “I love my wife,” he said.

“Liar,” I said. I said it over and over. “Liar, liar, liar. You’ve always been a liar.”

I opened the window and hurled my phone onto the sidewalk.

That thudding, cracking sound was the best thing ever. I still like to call it up from my memory, and re-listen to the violent death of that insipid device.

Back in school the following Tuesday, the kids were mostly comatose, hating that vacation was over. I couldn’t get a read on Angelo; he was in the shadow of a hoodie. About halfway through class, I was in the middle of explaining why the fifth paragraph must loop back to the first, and up he walks. He’s standing in front of me, staring.

“What are you doing?” I said. “When I’m speaking, you should be seated. And listening.”

“Can I go to the bathroom?” Now that I think back, he was probably sad. Or stoned. His eyes were glassy. But I was wound up in my own feelings. My pride. My need to be the one in charge.

“Go to the bathroom,” I said. “And you can go to the vice principal’s office afterward. Don’t come back.”

There was snickering.

As class ended, the last class of the day, he came to get his backpack as everyone was shuffling out. One kid said, “Thank you, Ms. Ross.”

There is always one nice one.

I pretended to be busy, looking for something in my filing cabinet. “They were playing the noise,” Angelo said. “The one you’re too old to hear.” Accusation in his voice, and hurt, and anger.

I tried to keep the upper hand, even though I was starting to feel ashamed. “Well, you can’t just walk up to me. In the middle of class.”

But he had been trying to help.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t know.”

“Well you wouldn’t.”

“I’m really sorry, I am.” I slumped like wet snow, sliding off the roof in the sun. The hallways were clearing out. The school settling, almost vibrating with the sudden quiet. I stood again and reached for anything. A pencil, a box of Kleenex, but sat back down, sideways in the clunky little desk. “I’ve been, I don’t know.” I stared at the floor. A paper airplane made of today’s homework was halfway under my desk. “Can you see me?” I said in a small voice. I

watched his feet.

“I can see you, of course I can. You’re a good teacher.”

I shook my head. “No, I mean, really see.” I dared to look up. He was looking out the window. A few flakes of snow like lost baby insects toppling toward the ground. “Do you really see me? Sometimes I think I’m invisible.”

“You’re not invisible. It’s just your hearing’s not good.” He unzipped the side of his backpack and slid in the pencil that had been tucked behind his ear. I hadn’t realized how much I loved him for being able to keep a pencil balanced there. He hoisted the backpack onto his shoulder. “But it’s not your fault,” he said. “You’re just old. It happens to everyone.”

As I replayed our conversation, there was nothing particularly comforting in the words, but I felt calmer. I *was* getting older. Putting it so bluntly wasn’t painful, it was just true. And I was grateful that he had listened and responded (not that he’d truly understood the question, but at least he hadn’t judged). He hadn’t looked at me with eyes of concern, like my mother, or skepticism, like Steve. He’d just answered simply, like a child. And thank god he hadn’t grasped the scope of the question. Because I shouldn’t have asked it, not of anyone.

That evening, I poured myself an extra-large scotch and started to fling junk mail across the living room and wonder about Angelo, about his life, about his parents. My lack of curiosity about who he was apart from the role he’d played in my life ashamed me. The solution wouldn’t involve anything outside of myself, which was comforting. All it required was a different kind of thought.

I also realized that I should be thankful to Steve for ending it quickly. The years he and I



spent as a couple were pretty terrible; why would now be any different?

I might have texted him, to tell him I was okay, to make peace, to put his mind at ease. But my phone was broken. The snow was falling harder now and burying it on the sidewalk, three floors down.