

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’.”

Adalina was not in the mood for loud rednecks. She was not in the mood for Italy. She was not in the mood for travelling alone with kids, keeping track of passports and dealing with rental cars. Her sick grandmother Nonni, if Adalina was honest with herself, would ideally die while she 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 only four hours in.

Molly the flight attendant with the blonde bun brought the men another handful of miniature bottles of Jack Daniels. Adalina could watch them out of her periphery if she tilted her heads towards her kids, who sat together across the aisle from her, while she sat in the edge of a middle row. It seemed unlikely she would be getting any sleep during the rest of the flight; she had a bad feeling about these rowdy men sitting behind her. Molly took her time placing ice in fresh cups for them, 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 an attempt not to get caught. Molly seemed 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 walking briskly up the aisle, seemed not to hear. Adalina whipped around and gazed at them disbelievingly. Seeing this, the men pointed at her and burst out in another round of raspy laughter. Adalina’s cheeks became hot; 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 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. 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 seven while Mary was five. Before the divorce, their father had always been fascinated with the planet for reasons Adalina never understood. During his birth Mars had nearly been strangled by his umbilical cord. When it was all over, she 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, any time Adalina had to reveal the name to other moms and teachers, which sounded like one a movie star 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 redeem herself.

She flipped through a SkyMall magazine. One page advertised an electronic photo slideshow in a nice wooden frame. In the picture an active, white-haired grandmother smiled at her grandchildren, engaged as they were with their crayons at a kitchen table. Adalina wondered how her kids would hold up if they did have to attend a funeral after all. They knew Nonni from sporadic trips to her villa outside Naples. They were fond of Nonni, who always had sweets fresh

from the oven or candies in her purse, while Adalina herself felt close if only in memory. It had been since she was a teenager that she enjoyed playing in her farm, helping her in the kitchen or attending the never-ending trips to Mass. That all was part of a past life, and Nonni had never approved of her new one, her atheism, her corporate job or the constant take-out filling up the kitchen trash can. Her drinking. *Non puoi avere la botte piena e la moglie ubriaca!* She would inevitably remind Adalina, who always had a bottle before calling late at night, while Nonni, time zones away, was starting her day. “You can’t have a full wine barrel and a drunk wife! Be careful or you will lose that gorgeous husband!” Adalina hated being admonished by Nonni, especially in her thirties, yet lose him she did.

Adalina was in the mood for a drink. She knew she shouldn’t.

Mars and Mary, unlike their mother, loved getting out of the city and spending a week at Nonni’s, even without their electronics. They were incredulous 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 to be acted out. Mars and Mary played hide and seek with the neighboring kids among the hilly expanses between adjacent villas. 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 looked at them, Mary chewing on a strand of her brown, curly hair, Mars pulling on the velcro of his small Spiderman shoes. She had told them she was ill; were they expecting their typical getaway? Did they even know about death? She would not let them play violent video games or see those kinds of 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 horseshit 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. “*Maximum amount of drinks*,” the window redneck mimicked in a baby voice. “Bullcrap!” 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 of water if you are thirsty, but the kitchen is now closed--”

“Aw, fuck off lady,” said the window redneck. He was nearly yelling.

“Excuse me?” said Molly. Adalina sat up in her seat and turned to the scene, ready to get involved. Judging by Molly’s expression, she did not know how to deal with a customer who was being outright hostile. “There’s no need for that tone, sir.”

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

“Ain’t that the truth,” the other echoed.

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

“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. The aisle redneck leaned close to her and 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,” she could hear one mutter.

Adalina had an idea. She pressed the call button above her head. Molly the flight attendant arrived moments later.

“Yes,” Adalina said. “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, nodded and walked off.

“Miss, excuse me, miss--our drinks?” said the aisle redneck as she retreated, and when she did not respond he yelled “Miss! I’m talking to you!” 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, when we arrive in Rome, 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. Instead 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 Adalina sat up and turned herself to face the rednecks as much as she possibly could without putting her legs 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. Mary turned and watched her mother curiously. She stirred and sipped, then raised a glass up into the air to toast them, but mock-realizing they had nothing to toast with, shrugged, smiled again and took a big gulp. The men watched, stupefied. She turned back to face front, half afraid she would be clobbered in the side of the head.

She settled uneasily back into her seat. Mary watched, a bit confused, but continued watching her show. Worse, Adalina was now more afraid she was starting something she shouldn’t be in front of her children. “Have you been drinking? Where are the children?” Nonni used to ask when Adalina would still make the occasional long distance call. *Una buona mamma*

vale cento maestre! “A good mother is worth a hundred teachers! Be careful or you will lose those beautiful children!”

She thought she could make out the word “cunt” from the grumbling behind her, but she did not dare turn back around. “Fuck this,” one of the rednecks said. “I gotta take a piss.”

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

“Just ignore them,” she whispered to Mars 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 Mars’s seat, poking with such force that each thrust was a bump in Mars’s back, like a seat being kicked at a movie theater. It took only a few moments for Mars to pull out his headphones again.

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

The redneck kept thrusting his finger at the screen. His friend held back a laugh in his chest like a kid during church service. “I’m sorry, ma’am. Is my Solitaire bothering you somehow?”

“You can stop that 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 loud, hoarse laughter. “Plane time-out,” they repeated, nearly rolling in the aisles.

Whiskey warmed Adalina. The redneck returned to jabbing. Mars and Mary were looking at her anxiously.

Adalina unbuckled and stood up wordlessly, trying to remain calm. Towering as tall as she could over the stocky redneck, she swatted his finger away from the screen before it could push Mars’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 uptight 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 passengers watching as she stood, nearly yelling, 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, couple hours 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. He brought a cigarette to his mouth and lit it.

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

Adalina ignored him, eyes widening. “What the fuck do you think you are doing? It’s illegal to smoke on a plane! Do you want to get us all killed?”

“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 aisle.

“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 large weight on her back. When Adalina struggled to lift herself up, it was with great effort that she was finally able to begin crawling back up the aisle, but she could not seem to move far. People in their seats looked on at her, held down by seat belts and horrified, as she crawled against the upward slope of the still-diving plane. Hot liquid trickled down her cheek. “Mommy, you’re bleeding,” Mars yelled.

“It’s okay, honey,” she said. She could bring herself up on her knees holding onto his arm rest. Oxygen masks had fallen from the cabin ceiling. Ignoring protocol she fitted their masks, hands shaking as she pulled at the white strings, before climbing into her seat and fumbling with her seatbelt. She saw Molly’s bun briefly as she passed by at a downhill rush, holding onto seatbacks so as not to fall. Roberto was not in sight.

Adalina’s chest was in a knot and she tried to take a breath. She looked out Mary’s window, but everything was gray. The kids seemed barely held in their place by the seat belts that dug into their waists. She leaned across the aisle, holding Mars’s hand. “It’s fine,” she told them, terrified, “It’s just some trouble with the plane. It will be better in a little bit.”

“Mommy are we dying?” Mars asked.

“No, sweetie. We’re not dying. Everything is going to be ok, OK?” Adalina wanted to tuck Mary’s hair behind her ear but she could not reach.

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

Adalina forced her head against the seat and sobbed. She should have left the kids. 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, this is what it feels like, to be helplessly crashing through the sky in a plane, to be dying, to have the worst luck. 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. Had the flight attendants not been trained to do something in this situation? 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.

Nearby she could hear a woman sobbing. "Please, Lord Jesus," she said again and again. "Please, Jesus." Mary began to scream, crying as she not done since she was a baby. "Mommy!" Mars shouted at her.

In all the velocity of the careening mass bee-lining towards Earth, Adalina closed her eyes and waited for her life to flash before her eyes, but all she saw was black. She did nothing, she could do nothing. If this was it, she could not bring herself to believe it. There was so much left to do. Mars and Mary had not lived. They had not graduated, gotten jobs or married. She would not see them grown up, she could not think what they would look like. Was she still breathing? She opened her eyes again. Nothing had changed.

She was living a bad dream, a part of her believed, but she unbuckled herself and fell against the seat in front of her. She stretched and grabbed Mars's armrest, pulling herself unsteadily across the aisle until she could wedge herself in front of them. She could smell urine and she pulled each of them close. Small arms wrapped around her back and small hands grabbed at the back of her hair. Big sobs pounded into her ear and big tears wetted her cheeks.

"It's okay," said Adalina. "We'll be there soon."

Through the space in between the seats, she could see a hand clutching a knee, a cigarette still lit, tucked between two fingers, its long column of ash, holding on. The redneck in the aisle seat was staring at her with bulging eyes. He was pressed as far back in his seat as he could go, and he held tight to his armrests. He had not put on his oxygen mask. His expression was petrified, innocent and soft. She stared into the green of his eyes. The more she stared, the more green she saw, until nothing else seemed to exist except light dancing across two pools of green. She wondered where his mother was, or if she was alive.

Adalina closed her eyes. She was not sure if she would ever open them again.

Then, something changed. If not mistaken, she could feel her legs being pushed up from their undersides like an elevator coming to a stop. Her stomach seemed to be settling back into place. She could breathe a little easier. She dared to open her eyes and saw the redneck, still staring at her face. Overhead lights came on and, 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. Mars's eyes were red and wet, but he had stopped screaming. Mary continued to cry, and Adalina pulled her head close to her breast and stroked her hair. She craned her head out the aisle and looked around. Molly, hand to her chest, was unbuckling her seat belt. Others, too, were peering about. One man cried into his hands. In the distance, someone called for a first aid kit. A loud voice suddenly boomed overhead.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We cannot express how extremely sorry we are to have, uh, to have disturbed your flight. Unfortunately, not everything about flying can always be predicted, and what you just experienced was just such an occurrence. Flying directly towards us in our trajectory was another commercial flight which did not appear on our radars, and we had no other choice than to maneuver very sharply, very quickly into a dive to avoid collision. While this is a rare occurrence, it does happen. It is for situations such as these that is very important to follow safety protocols. Our flight attendants will be coming around immediately to attend to your needs. Again, we express our...

“LORD have mercy!” said the window redneck. “LORD fuck a DUCK what did we ever do.”

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

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

“My good god,” said the aisle one.

Adalina took a deep breath, still reeling. 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. “Lord, I was just thinking the same--” but the redneck couldn’t even finish his sentence, already breaking down into a fit as he was. In a second it was full on, hoarse and hysterical, laughter so hard that it had them bent over, that their voices became lost. Mars peered in between the seats at the rednecks. Mary, who had stopped crying at the sound of the captain, looked at Adalina, bewildered. Adalina realized then, wiping away a tear as Molly hurried past, that her kids were alive, she was alive, she was smiling, her stomach was hurting; she couldn’t control herself; she had begun laughing, too. “We’re okay,” she tried to tell them, pulling them close. “We’re okay.” They were still going to see Nonni, who was sick and dying, and all she could do was laugh.