Flight

(3638 words)

Aunt Tish's flight from San Francisco is twenty minutes late, a modest delay for air travel where schedules are precisely determined and carelessly ignored. Tish phoned me last night with details about her flight, but she's become less reliable as an agent for information or recall. She forgets where she parked her car in the Costco lot, confuses her banking numbers with birth dates, misplaces keys, leaves her house windows open and the backdoors unlocked, and her stories have acquired greater embellishments, adding people and places that don't exist. She's also begun erasing my mother from memory and last month she changed her will, making me the sole beneficiary. My cousins - her son and daughter- no longer speak to me, except through

lawyers, forcing me to decode Tish's rambling voicemail without familial interpreters, so I arrived at the airport an hour early to find parking and order a martini at the bar.

I love the idea of flight, the audacity of an enormous metal chunk lifting itself away from the Earth's surface; the pluck of a goose running across water and then flinging itself into the sky. As a kid I'd roll down the back window of our big maroon Monte Carlo when my mother drove me to the lake for swimming lessons and I'd plunge my arm into rushing warm air, flying my hand into the sky. I collected newspaper articles about plane crashes and organized crash statistics into tables and concluded that I'd never fly on DC-10s (doors fall off), 747s (doors fall off, also the greatest aviation disaster in history when two of them collided in Tenerife), bush planes (other than a twin-engine Otter, which is a legend in the North), pontoon planes (they flip in the water and drown occupants, except for the Otter), helicopters (no glide ability when rotors stop) or any regional airline (young and inexperienced crew who fail in crises). Tish is flying on a Boeing 737, the kind of plane whose metal skin peeled like a banana as it flew over Hawaii, dumping a flight attendant into the blue Pacific. The plane's skin is old and stretched tight and the cool dry pressurized air in the cabin pushes on the thin walls, blood inside a weakened vessel, a potential aneurysm. Aunt Tish doesn't care about these details though, she's not interested in a plane's death history or the unbearable logic of flight. Once, flying to Toronto, she yelled "beam me down Scotty" after the captain, whose implausible name was Captain Kirk, announced that the landing gear was stuck and he had to dump fuel over Lake Ontario.

I sit down on a silver, metal bench to wait for Tish. A crowd of Indians has formed under the arrival screen, checking flight times, chattering and smiling. The women wear bright, silk saris and the men are in blousy pants. A young boy, maybe ten years old, tosses a ball in the air

and catches it in his baseball mitt. His next toss is so high it bounces off the screen and rolls along the carpeted floor towards me. He runs for the ball and scoops it into his mitt before it hits my shoe.

“Are you waiting for a friend or a relative?’ he asks.

“I’m waiting for my aunt.”

“Oh. My aunt was killed on a plane. She was in a plane that broke into pieces because a bomb exploded on it. She is somewhere in the sea. In Ireland."

The boy tosses the ball again, just above his head.

“Do you watch baseball? My friends and I play baseball but my dad doesn't want us to. He says we should play cricket or we will become too Canadian.”

The Indians move closer to the glass wall that separates us from the arrivals. Three women hold a long banner that says “Welcome Home Mohandass and Nirmala.”

“We prayed to Vishnu to save this plane. My mother prayed at the temple all week, but I played baseball. Have you prayed for your aunt’s plane?”

“No. I don’t pray, but I hope. Kind of the same.”

“I hope Nirmala’s plane is safe. She is flying over Ireland where a bomb can happen. Are you Christian?”

“Yes, I was.”

“You should pray to Vishnu, even if you are a Christian.”

A woman in a gold sari walks over, her short steps raking the floor.

“Sriva, please come back here. You must not bother this man.”

Sriva tucks the ball into his glove.

"This is my mother," Sriva says. "She will pray for your aunt!"

"Oh, I am sorry if he is bothering you. He is such a talker now."

I tell her that Sriva is not bothering me and I hope they don't have to wait too long for their family to arrive.

"Mother. Can I wait here? You can see me and it's so boring."

"Yes, but don't lose the ball."

***

Imagine this.

I am twelve years old. My mother is quoting James Howell, explaining why she is going to fly in Mr. Haraldson's Cessna on Saturday morning. "You've gut to git up airly, ef you want to take in God," she shouts, pouring too much milk over my Cheerios. My father calls her an idiot and loudly reminds her that she is agnostic, even though she was baptized in the United Church and my father was raised Catholic. Mother has started reading popularized mathematics and science books from her Book of the Month Club subscription, with titles like *Mathematics for the Millions* and *A 1001 Scientific Discoveries.* She lectures us at the dinner table. "If you can prove something mathematically, then it's true." She explains carbon dating and how the Earth was created 2 billion years ago, not in 4004 B.C. as Bishop Usher calculated from Biblical evidence. "Science, " she says, looking directly at my father while he eats toast, "is more complicated than God."

I worry about her plan. For two weeks I imagine how Haraldson's plane will crash, convinced that Haraldson will black out at the controls, his ability to see the horizon blurred by

twenty six ounces of Canadian Club. My father calls him “the town drunk”. Who will look after me if she dies?

I lend her my motorcycle helmet, a gift from my father on my twelfth birthday, who opposed the small dirt bike I bought with paper-route profits but acquiesced when my mother said she’d buy one for herself if he kept protesting.

“I’ll get a motorcycle and Ethan can ride on the back of it with me.”

The helmet looks like a white bowling ball with a red sun visor. It fits her so she rests it on her lap when we drive to the airport.

The airport is typical for a logging town. A corrugated steel hangar shelters three small planes and the terminal is a white, aluminum-sided mobile home balanced on concrete cinder blocks. Two single-engine planes are tethered to steel pegs by thick ropes, the pegs hammered ten feet into the sand dunes that rim the runway. Haraldson’s Cessna is revving and rocking and the engine sounds like an overworked lawnmower. He wears mirrored aviator’s glasses and leaves them on when we meet him.

“How long will you be up there?” my father asks.

“About a half hour. We fly around Morfee Lake and straight into the mountains.”

Mom walks to the plane, allowing Haraldson to hold her elbow. I yell at her to put the helmet on. She slips the white ball onto her head and gives me a thumbs up. My dad and I stand on the dunes where we can see the runway from start to finish. The Cessna’s engine whines louder and the plane taxis onto the tarmac. I’m surprised how slow it moves at take off, bouncing up and down like a Marionette. I could run alongside it and grab a wheel and pull them down to

the ground. Haraldson yanks the plane into a steep climb and banks to the left, flying towards the mountains.

"The Rockies don't look any better up there than they do from down here. At least down here I can appreciate their size, " my father says.

We walk back to our car. Dad leans on the car's hood and kicks dirt with his new cowboy boots, puts a Freddy Fender tape into the eight-track player and we listen to Freddy sing about wasted days and nights. We watch the plane rise above the tree-line and dissolve into the snow and sunshine that sketch the mountains' peaks. I pick wild blueberries growing around the runway, smashing them into my mouth. After an hour I tell my father "I'm not sure they are still up there."

He is still propped against the car, rubbing dirt onto his boots.

"Dad, maybe Mr. Haraldson crashed the plane."

"No," he replied. "He's sober."

I watch and listen and finally see a sharp glint in the sky, moving slow and steady like the satellites I sometimes see passing over our town in the night. Haraldson's plane arrives in a wide circle, drops to twenty feet above the runway, drifts left over the blueberry bushes and bounces along the tarmac. In the infinite time between flight and landing there are a million chances the Cessna will cartwheel down the asphalt, breaking my mother's body into a thousand pieces, her head preserved inside the white helmet. She steps out of the plane before the propellor stops whirling and raises her arms. A victory gesture, or an open and empty hug? Dad sits in the car looking at her in the rear-view mirror. Freddy is still crooning when Haraldson catches up to my mother and kisses her on her cheek.

I unlock her door and slide into the back seat directly behind mother, who opens her window and lets the warm air rush through her hair, pushing it aloft and I stick my arm out and let if fly.

***

Sriva sits beside me.

"These benches are torture! They make them hard and cold so you won't sit."

He puts his glove between his legs and sets the ball on the floor, between his feet, and massages the dirty floor, rolling the ball back and forth over the hard surface.

Tish's flight is now forty minutes late. The electronic information board blacks out for a minute, the green letters dissolve away, and then new numbers assemble, into new predictions, fresh expectations.

"Oh no! Their Irish plane is going to be later. Airports are the worst."

Sriva looks for his mother who is out of earshot. He pushes and pulls the ball hard and fast, erasing more grime.

Does the Hindu religion prohibit gambling? Do they see the similarity between the arrivals board in the airport and a tote board at the horse races? The odds for a horse change as bets are placed. Could the arrival times bear the expectations that friends and family bring to the airport, exposing their collective wish for the plane to make it across the finish line?

"Look! Those men are pilots!"

Sriva points to two men wearing caps and uniforms, walking past us carrying small duffels. One man is short and thin wearing his jacket short and tight, like a private-school boy stuffed into his clothes from an earlier grade. I trust he is the copilot. I want testosterone in the

cockpit during a crisis, at least one man to keep the nose up in a final act of self preservation and heroics, not a schoolboy.

"Those guys are cowboys. My mother said that when she was on a plane that was bucking like a horse. They know how to ride a wild horse."

***

My father was not a cowboy, even though he wore sharp-toed boots, checkerboard shirts, GWG jeans and a big-buckled belt. Mom called it his "Howdy Doody" outfit. He never wore anything else after we moved from Toronto to the logging town. I thought he looked like the Marlboro Man.

My parents did nothing together with me, so if she took me swimming at Morfee Lake, he'd offer a different activity on a different day, to balance the parenting ledger.

"Let's take the propellor plane out today. Your mom had you at the lake yesterday."

Dad bought the plane in Vancouver on one of his business trips. Its gossamer-thin wings spanned four feet, and the fuselage, a hollow, balsa wood replica of a single-engine bush plane, had call numbers, and landing wheels that actually rolled. A rubber band provided kinetic tension to spin the propellor and pull the plane.

We drove out of town to the straight stretch of highway to launch it. The air was slightly acrid from a recent fire, but the cleared forest meant we could see cars coming for miles. I didn't want to fly the plane, I just wanted to rest it on the yellow median and pretend, without consequences.

“There isn’t a car coming down this road for hours, son. Fly the plane. I'm going to sit in the car and write a few notes for work.”

“Dad? How many times do I wind up the propellor?”

“Until it’s too tight to keep winding.”

He was busy writing his notes; he’d been writing notes for weeks on yellow legal pads, lines and lines, much longer than memos.

I twisted the rubber band until I thought it might break and held the plane with two hands, one restraining the rubber band from unravelling and the other on the tail.

“Let it go Ethan. It’s made to fly.”

The plane sped down the highway, lifted away and flew higher than I’d imagined. Dad stopped writing to see its improbable trajectory. At the top of its arc, it rolled upside down and swirled in tiny circles to the ground, crashing in a blueberry patch. The tail had snapped and the wings had twisted, rendering the plane flightless.

“It’s the wind, dad. It’s too windy up there.”

He didn’t hear me. A momentary gust, a mini tornado, lifted his yellow sheets from the open car and, as he ran around trying to pick them up, one landed on my foot. I grabbed it, careful not to scrunch the paper. His handwriting was in a cursive script comprising feminine and masculine strokes, so legible I could read a few words - “love”, “passion”, “lost hope”- and my mother’s name. He snatched it from my hand.

“Are you writing to mom?”

“It’s private. Pick up your plane and we’ll fix it. Let’s go home and fix it.”

We got into the car and drove home without speaking. I put the broken plane in my closet and left it there until we sold the house and moved to Vancouver.

***

Sriva's white ball is turning grey. He hums songs and squirms, shifting from one seat to another.

"Do you like living here? I like the park. I can't swim though. My aunt couldn't swim and I think you should not fly over water if you can't swim. We can't go on school trips without passing a swimming test."

"Where would you go that you need to swim?"

"India. My parents want me to visit there and meet all my relatives."

"Ah. That sounds fun. I meant school trips."

"We went camping in Squamish. They have really big cliffs there, with names like Little Smoke Bluffs. My friends tried smoking but not me."

Sriva looks at me, expecting an answer.

"That's good. I don't smoke either. My mother did. Two packs every day. And a bottle of Pepsi too."

"Wow! Is she still alive? "

I look at the board and the green letters dissolve and reappear again. Maybe the weather is getting worse or there is an errant cargo handler on the runway; could a bomb threat have held

all the planes in the sky, forcing them to fly around the city, until they can safely spiral down from the mountains and sea and onto the river delta on which the airport sits?

"What if this is like the Bermuda Triangle?. Did you read that about the planes that just went 'poof', gone like a magic trick?" Sriva puts his ball in his mitt and slides down his seat. "Is she still alive."

"I think one day they'll find all those missing ships and planes. We'll know what happened to those people."

He waves his index finger back and forth at me, a scolding.

"I do that at school. Not answering questions. My mother does that to me too, when I ask her what is for dinner because I smell something I hate."

***

On schooldays I came home for lunch to eat crustless sandwiches and read comics. Television was not allowed since it's low-brow entertainment and we only get two channels. My mother sat in the living room listening to classical music, drinking sherry and reading her new book, *How to Listen to the Great Composers.* After eating my sandwiches I'd sneak gum-drop cookies from the jar that is never empty.

One morning my mother is up for breakfast before I leave for school. She never gets up early, unless it's Christmas morning and she's tending the turkey, or we are leaving for our annual trip to Vancouver, to escape the "cultural and intellectual wasteland" we live in. Every night she sits in the living room, smoking and drinking Pepsi and reading books, consuming facts

and living an imagined and different life. Our tiny spot on Earth is halfway back to light when she finally goes to bed. She sleeps in until me and my father have left the house, but on that morning she makes me French toast, sprinkled with cinnamon, floating in syrup. I love it.

"Mom. Did you go to bed early last night?"

"No, but I wanted to do something nice for you. Before your father comes down from his room."

"I have a really cool school project. I have to make a lunar landscape model. We're reading 2001 A Space Odyssey."

"That's wonderful. I'll give you the ingredients and instructions on how to make the base from flour."

"You'll help, right? Maybe dad can help me build the obelisk."

She rushed to clean the dishes, to get back to her room. Her housecoat belt fell into the syrup on my plate, staining the blue terry cloth; she leaned up to the sink and rinsed it under the tap.

Later that day I rush home for lunch, hoping that my mother's light mood means a hot lunch. Instead I find the sandwiches on a plate with a note beside them.

"And this gray spirit yearning in desire, to follow knowledge like a sinking star…." Tennyson. Dear son. Call your father at work and remain calm. You will understand when you are older.

I'm hungry and worried that she's figured out I steal the cookies. She's not in the house. I need to find her before calling dad at work. I look through her bookshelves for Tennyson, thinking that if I can find the book, read the passage, I will decipher her riddle. There

is an empty space on her shelf where she might have placed it beside the other authors with a T. The liquor cupboard has a bottle of sherry. My sandwiches are cut into triangles and the cookie jar is full. I sit down, feeling like a boy at his own birthday party, waiting for friends to come, who never do.

***

A week later the Hercules search plane finds Mr. Haraldson and my mom in the woods, less than three hundred feet from the runway. The giant plane had passed over the crash site a dozen times, but the Cessna had flown straight into the trees without scarring the canopy. The Cessna is pulverized into the ground. There is no explosion or fire. Their bones have shattered, their bodies have collapsed, like deflated balloons. Ice had coated the wings, robbing the plane of the push it needed to stay in flight, as if the hand of God that held it aloft had suddenly been pulled away.

Within a month my dad has sold the house and we have moved to Vancouver. In another month he leaves me with Aunt Tish and goes to Toronto with a woman he knows, who works for him.

“You’re not the Marlboro man! ” I yell at him. “You should never have worn cowboy boots!”

“I wore them because your mother bought them for me.”

He’s a liar. I vow never to attend a rodeo or watch a cowboy movie.

***

The Indian's flight has landed. Sriva's mother comes back to the bench and tells him to join them and help with the banner.

"One minute. I will be right there."

She nods and leaves him with a stern warning not to be a second later.

"Here. I am going to throw the ball to you and I want you to make one good pitch to me," he says.

"That's not a good idea. What if you don't catch it? Something could break or someone gets hit."

"First of all I'm a good catcher, and you look like you can throw a ball straight. Just once, please?"

He lobs the ball into a long parabolic arch, the apex near the ceiling, and it plunges down the other side of the parabola into my open hand. Sriva backs away towards the exit doors and when no one is walking past he crouches and gives me a thumbs up. I glance to the board and see that Tish's plane has landed. I wind up my arm and let the ball fly towards the boy, who waits with his glove open, trusting me not to throw a wild pitch.