

A Good Story

There was a problem with the woman in 17D. Marjorie told Jonathan so once she found him hiding in the first class galley, massaging his chin. “This could be a keeper,” she said.

Jonathan smiled at her as he’d smiled at women all his life. From the time he was sixteen, it had been known to turn mothers and daughters into harlots. It had certainly done so to Marjorie the previous night. It was happening again before his eyes.

“It’ll make a good story,” she said.

He caught that she was referring to something he had told her the previous night, as he lay naked on top of the sheets, a glass of water balanced in the hollow of his chest. Clearly she had misunderstood his point. He had told her that he was tired of the stories he’d picked up along the way, the wonderful dinner company stories, the on a back deck with a cigar and a gin and tonic stories. “They depress the hell out of me,” he had told her.

Standing with her now in the galley with the plane’s engines churning, he could tell that Marjorie must have thought that he was tired only of his *old* stories, and that he wanted new ones, maybe even with her.

But the truth was, Jonathan was tired of *all* stories – tired of telling them, tired of hearing them, tired of living them. He didn’t know how to stop, though. He worried that he’d been a character for too long to suddenly become something more – if in fact it was even possible to be more than a character in someone else’s story.

And now here was another story about to fall out of Marjorie’s mouth. He wanted to interrupt her. He wanted to stop her before she started. He was ready to tell something that wasn’t a story. He was ready to tell it to anyone, even poor, young Marjorie, who never read the books she should have or completed the thoughts that could have changed her life. He was, in fact, growing ready to answer the question that she wouldn’t know to ask, the one that he’d been flying over for the last three years: why wasn’t he with his long-neglected daughter, damn the humiliation, as she languished, gray matter becoming the color of worms as the tumor in her head grew and grew and grew?

Jonathan followed Marjorie to the old woman who sat over the wing. Hunched in her seat with her chin on her chest, the woman didn’t answer when Marjorie asked if she’d like anything to drink. Instead, the young man sitting next to her placed a hand on top of the old woman’s and patted it gently. “She’s not thirsty,” he said with a grin. His swallowed accent was Puerto Rican.

Standing slightly behind Marjorie, Jonathan looked carefully at the old woman. Her mouth was open wide. Her lips and the tongue that rested on them looked dry. Jonathan tapped Marjorie on the shoulder. She stood erect and gestured mockingly for Jonathan to take over.

Jonathan felt terribly uncomfortable. Though he knew that most passengers paid little attention to him, he couldn’t help sensing that some of them were watching him. He crouched down and placed his hand on the woman’s forearm. “*Algo para tomar, senora?*” he whispered.

Her companion stared out the window and grinned slightly. The woman didn't respond.

Jonathan leaned forward and repeated the question. Her companion looked down at his knees.

Jonathan stood up.

“*Esta muerta?*” he asked the young man who turned to him.

“Yes,” he said. “She is dead.”

Jonathan nodded and raised his eyebrows. He paused. He was well aware that sending a body as cargo requires an unholy arithmetic. When the blood stills and the breath stops, the body becomes freight. It becomes pounds added to the pounds of the casket added to the cost of insuring irreplaceable wares. And so on most flights, the body becomes more expensive to transport than the individual.

Still, Jonathan became angry, if invisibly so. He'd wanted a quiet trip like the thousand before it. It was his nature, he'd concluded, to seek quiet in a noisy world.

Jonathan's daughter was named Chloe. He didn't know her or her mother much at all. He couldn't, in fact, remember either of their faces. He'd left when Jennifer was barely twenty-one and Chloe just eight weeks.

In his fistful of memories of Jennifer, her body was intact. Her words were intact. She said, “If you leave me, Jonathan. If you leave me, you will never forgive yourself.” She said it with such passion that it sounded original, God-sent.

He could see her hair, matted with tears and oil and aggressive sleep, her pointed elbows, her breasts – somehow still distinct from the hundreds he'd seen since. And he remembered how she once asked him to bite gently on her nipple as she came and also how she once kissed him on his forearm during a movie. And yet he had no face for her.

Not for his daughter either. Just details: her own nipples, belly, bottom, fingernails, splotch of darkened skin on her right thigh like the map of a country.

That was not entirely true. He had seen their faces since he left them twenty-three years ago. He had seen them in the pictures that Jennifer sent to his mother twice a year: at Christmas and on Chloe’s birthday. Whenever he visited his mother in Cleveland, Jonathan looked for the newest photos leaning against the wall, perched like ready birds on the mantle.

For Jonathan, though, these faces in the pictures were not real. They were frozen and predictable like characters on television. He could feel his mother watching him as he stepped closer to the photographs. He was always grateful that when he turned back to her, she looked down at the meal she was preparing and asked what he thought of the President.

“This was not the plan,” Carlos told Jonathan who was busy taking the old woman’s pulse. “We are truly very sorry.”

Jonathan nodded. “I’m Jonathan,” he said. “This is your mother?”

“No, no. My grandmother. My name is Carlos,” he added, tapping his chest twice lightly.

The woman seated behind Carlos and his grandmother stood up suddenly and touched Jonathan on the shoulder. She was tall and trim, wearing jeans and a fleece jacket, a young mother who alternately patted and rubbed the back of the infant who was sleeping but stirring against her shoulder. “Should we find another seat?” she whispered to Jonathan. He nodded, and she smirked sadly.

“Did this happen in the airport?” Jonathan asked Carlos.

“No, no. On the plane. Definitely on the plane.”

Jonathan nodded. “Carlos, you should know that we have procedures, which we must follow in situations like this.”

“Well, by all means, do what you have to do. I certainly don’t want to cause a problem.”

Jonathan offered Carlos the same smile that the woman with the infant had just offered him. It felt no better to give than to receive. He stood up and moved briskly to the front of the plane. To any passengers watching him, it might have looked as though he was rushing to get a man a cocktail or a woman a pillow when, in fact, he was completing the first on a list of carefully outlined procedures; he was going to inform the Captain about the corpse.

“Why don’t you see the humor in this?” whispered Marjorie. They were alone for a moment just after Jonathan had spoken to the entire cabin crew in a hastily called and conspicuous meeting in the main galley in the rear of the plane. “Come on, it’s *funny*,” she said, thrusting her neck forward and crinkling her nose. “This will make a *very* funny story.”

“Maybe I’m not in the mood,” Jonathan said to his feet. He looked up after a moment. “And you should know before you commit public suicide that not *everyone* will find this one funny.”

“Well, the pterodactyls can go fuck themselves.”

Jonathan was annoyed that Marjorie had begun to mimic some of the other young flight attendants who referred to the very senior flight attendants in this way. It had begun to feel crass to him.

Overhead, the captain’s intercom crackled. He informed the passengers that there had been an incident on the plane and asked, as required, whether there were any medical personnel on the plane who could help.

“I should go,” Jonathan told Marjorie.

As he left, Marjorie reached out and pinched the almost imperceptible roll of soft fat that had begun to collect along his waist. He looked back at her suddenly aghast. She was smiling.

“Do you mind if I sit down?” Jonathan asked Carlos.

“No, no. It’s your plane,” said Carlos, who with his hand guided Jonathan to the empty window seat next to him. To keep his balance, Jonathan put his hand on the old woman’s knee as he slid past her. He saw that her mouth was still open and that her eyes were closed surprisingly softly. He noticed that some dry skin on her cheeks was flaking off in scales and that her forehead was smooth and unclenched.

By now, many passengers had concluded what the situation was. The traffic flow past the old woman’s row had increased to such an extent that Carlos had begun to wave slightly at the men and women who walked past pretending to be on their way to the lavatories. As Jonathan sat down, Carlos did so to a young man in a baseball cap.

Jonathan had always thought that the formality of his uniform was ludicrous – as if serving dinner at thirty-thousand feet earned a waiter a promotion to lieutenant – but never before had he felt more embarrassed about his appearance than at the moment he looked at Carlos and past him at his dead grandmother. He began to grow unbearably hot. He unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. He scratched his shoulder trying to cover the silver wings of his nametag.

“This is a terrible thing to say,” he told Carlos, “but, according to the regulations, we’re supposed to begin CPR on your grandmother. I should be giving her mouth to mouth right now.”

Carlos gestured with his hand for Jonathan to begin.

“Would you like that? Are you requesting that?” Jonathan felt suddenly formal and derelict.

“My grandmother is dead. But rules are rules.” His accent was nearly imperceptible.

Jonathan nodded and turned to look out the window. “Are you returning home?”

“Well, her home. I grew up in the states.” The two men looked at each other as the engines groaned. “I’m sure she’s angry that she didn’t make it,” Carlos said finally. “I’m sure she’d think she’d failed somehow. She has the immigrant’s sense of drama. You know what I mean, I imagine.”

Jonathan nodded, though he felt awkward doing so.

“The old woman wanted to go home to die. She never liked Boston. ‘*Boston* is not old,’ she used to say. ‘*I* am old.’”

Jonathan asked how old his grandmother was.

“Eighty-seven,” he answered quickly. “She would not die on the mainland like her husband and sons had. ‘America made them weak,’ she said. ‘If they stayed in San Juan, these men would be alive,’ she said.”

When he mimicked his grandmother, Carlos used a child’s voice. He wrinkled his nose as well.

“They died of diseases that she thought didn’t exist at home: leukemia, melanoma, heart failure. ‘*Maricónes*,’ she called these men who she once revered and feared. Fags.”

Again feeling awkward, Jonathan looked over his shoulder. Carlos was speaking more loudly than he ought. Jonathan worried that another flight attendant might overhear and then wonder why Jonathan was paying more attention to the living passenger than the dead woman.

Carlos didn't seem to share Jonathan's concern. “And so I bought two tickets from Boston to San Juan. We left without asking the doctor's permission. ‘In what kind of country does an old woman need to ask if she is allowed to die in her own bed?’ That was my grandmother's big question.”

Just then, a man in a Red Sox sweatshirt approached their seats. He said, “I am a doctor. I can assist you.” His Spanish accent was considerably thicker than Carlos'.

Carlos grinned at the man. “I think we're okay.”

The doctor leaned slightly forward and looked at the old woman. He touched her neck, which had taken on the sallow color of the dead. The gray hairs in his mustache shivered as he exhaled through his nose. “I can do CPR.”

The doctor looked at Jonathan who shook his head slightly. The doctor looked back at the old woman. “Right then,” he said after he'd stared at her for several breaths. “Well, God bless you both.” It was unclear which two among the three seated in the row the doctor was referring to. He returned to his seat.

The drone of the jet engines occupied a moment. “You seem close to her,” Jonathan said finally. He took an open-mouthed breath. “I'm sorry you had to lose someone you were close to. And particularly under these circumstances.”

“Close? Us? I wouldn't say that. She had no use for me. She said first my mother and then I ruined the family with all our talk of America.”

Jonathan nodded.

“So we were not close, no,” Carlos added.

“Well, it is – it is something that happened here. And this was not the place for it to happen.”

“A Good Story”

“That is true. That is very true. Setting is important.”

Jonathan sat nodding and looking at Carlos waiting to find something to say. He resorted to procedure. He said, “there will be an ambulance waiting when we arrive.”

“We appreciate it. Thank you.” Jonathan stood up and grinned. Carlos said, “Again, we’re very sorry. This was obviously not the plan.”

Jonathan nodded and waved off the apology. “Of course,” he said. “What kind of plan would this be?”

Jonathan retreated to the first class cabin where he served men with gold cufflinks salmon and sherbet. Periodically, Marjorie stepped through the curtain to fill him in even after he told her that he didn’t want to know.

“When I served him his dinner, he put a napkin on her lap!” she told Jonathan while gripping his elbow. “It’s bizarre. I think he was joking. I think he’s enjoying it. Like he’s famous or something. Famous by death. Isn’t that bizarre?” Jonathan didn’t respond.

“Shouldn’t we have landed somewhere else?” Marjorie continued. “I’m sure if the captain had to reach over the corpse to give the man his beef stroganoff, he might have opted for the nearest patch of dry ground.”

“Would you stop? I don’t want to hear.”

“Oh, Jonathan. Stop acting like an old man. You’re not my father.” She paused and looked at him suspiciously for a moment. “Be careful,” she said. “You’re practically the only straight man I know anymore. If you get old and turn into one of the hens that run this ship, I’ll have no choice but to start sleeping with the passengers.”

Jonathan could feel his face melt into an expression he’d never sensed before as if his

tongue had found an old and bitter seed that had been lodged between his teeth for decades.

“What is *that* face?” Marjorie asked.

Jonathan didn’t respond.

“I’ll see you when we land,” Marjorie said as if confused. Jonathan grinned politely as she gazed at him and then turned back around and headed for the rear of the plane.

During the in-flight movie, Jonathan stayed in the first class galley and paged through the paperwork he was in charge of. He ran his finger slowly along the edge of the sheets until he could feel the skin on his fingertip begin to cleave. Before the blood came, he stopped and placed his finger in his mouth.

With his free hand, he patted his breast pocket twice. The letter was still there. It was from a young woman named Julia who said she was Chloe’s lifelong best friend. It was a secret note, according to Julia. “Chloe would kill me if she knew I’d written to you. She swears she has no interest in you. To be honest, Mr. Dulles, I don’t have much use for you either. But the fact is, Chloe is dying and the other fact is that I think that it is your absence from her life more than the astrocytoma that is killing her.”

Jonathan grinned slightly when he read those words the first time three weeks ago. There was a certain poetry to them, he felt. They brimmed with hurt. They pulsed with it. It felt oddly satisfying to read them in this young woman’s handwriting, which still had the markings of a teenager’s, even though, as she professed, she and Chloe were born only twelve days apart twenty-three years ago.

On this flight to San Juan, Jonathan didn’t take the note out. Simply feeling its weight in his pocket was enough.

He did allow himself his fantasy though, the only one he had anymore. He had secretly forbidden himself from indulging in it because it resolved nothing. But there was something about Carlos and his dead grandmother that pushed him irreversibly towards his dream. It was the one in which he saw Chloe again, the one in which he gathered the courage to re-enter the scene.

He didn't have to wonder where it would take place. She would not be a passenger whom he unwittingly had to serve. There would be no awkward gasps of recognition as he asked whether she was firmly buckled in, only to look up to see in his daughter's face his own.

No, the meeting would be on the ground. And yet he didn't know precisely where, and so he decided to set his dying daughter in his own mother's house. In fact, in Jonathan's mind, his daughter was lying in his own bed, the one he spent his childhood in, the same one on which he made love to Chloe's mother in the summer of 1979.

On the individual screens of his first class passengers, the movie streamed as the jet engines churned air and burned fuel. On the screens, cars sped as they chased. Men with exasperated faces spoke to each other. Jonathan blocked out the sounds escaping the earphones of the passengers around him.

In his mind, he was turning the knob of his mother's front door. Inside the house, people mingled as if at a wake, glasses of water and wine in their hands. As he entered the house and set his bags down in the entryway, they stopped their conversations and stared at him.

Once he began to walk through the room and towards the hallway where he could sense Chloe was, the guests returned to their muttering. As he passed the pairs and groups, though, he couldn't catch a single word that made any sense.

The door to his room was shut but not completely. He stood in front of it and looked at

the unbroken sliver of light that framed each of its edges.

Jonathan could feel himself begin to sweat, that hot rush of anxiety that he despised and avoided, when he heard a door open. It wasn't the door he was staring at. It was the door behind him, the bathroom door, from which emerged Jennifer, Chloe's mother. He looked at her and grinned sadly. Neither she nor her face said anything. Instead, she lifted her arm and gestured for him to open the door to his childhood room. He did.

Chloe was asleep. Or at least she looked so to Jonathan. He moved towards the edge of the bed and knelt. Chloe didn't move. With his weight resting on the hand that gripped the side of the bed, he closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, he caught sight of something he hadn't noticed before, his mother seated on a folding chair in the corner of the room. She held her hands in her lap. Above her head was a framed picture of him and his parents at the lakefront. Its yellowed edges had begun to curl. She said nothing. He looked back down at his daughter.

Her hair had begun to grow back from where it had been shaved. He stared reverentially at the two keloiding scars that ran like ornate mountain ranges along her skull. Jonathan couldn't resist the impulse to touch these ridges. Slowly he ran his finger along the crest of the scars. The hairs pushing through the healing wound pricked his fingertip. He felt the sharp piercing of skin that precedes the thin ribbon of blood.

Before he noticed her eyes open, he felt Chloe's hand grip his wrist.

“What are you doing here?” Chloe rasped. She sounded like an asthmatic.

“What am I doing here?” repeated Jonathan. “Isn't this where I should be?” He looked at his daughter open-mouthed. She didn't answer his question.

His fantasy always ended here at this unanswered question – as if the open space between

the asking and the answering revealed something weighty and of substance. He wondered what he was supposed to take from this empty space and what the characters in this hollowed-out story were supposed to tell him. He spent his days slicing through emptiness, cutting incisions in the air, the heavens above, the planet below, and there was nothing more to it, a simple transporting from here to there, him to her, them to them. What could he conclude from the empty scene that rattled in his head? He decided on nothing. Nothing.

As promised, an ambulance was waiting for the old woman when the plane landed. Jonathan let the paramédicos on before any of the passengers were allowed to deplane. Carlos followed behind the stretcher. He touched Jonathan on the elbow and smiled as he passed.

Once the passengers were off, Jonathan completed his duties without speaking to Marjorie. He could overhear her telling the details to the other attendants and to the crew who seemed to absorb the details through their gaping mouths.

Once off the plane, Jonathan walked straight out of the airport to flag down a cab. He didn't wait for Marjorie. He could already begin to feel the heat of her anger that he knew she would share with him at the hotel. He didn't ever want to see her again – or anyone else he knew or didn't know.

It was evening in San Juan. The air was heavy with a rain that refused to come. Standing on the curb, Jonathan looked out at the taxis that teemed like fish in and out of the space in front of him. He imagined they were all darting to homes as if magnetically and magically pulled towards them. He heard the sirens of the old woman's ambulance leaving the airport but didn't follow its path with his eyes.