

Silent Public Disturbance

“Thank you for choosing Southwest, Mr. Conrad,” said the stewardess as I sat down in a mid-plane window seat. -My ex-wife once told me that when a plane malfunctions in the air, it is the ends that catch fire, often scorching the passengers to death before the plane dives below 5,000 feet. Looking back, that story was the only thing out of her mouth I took seriously our entire marriage.-

“I see you avoided the hoarding,” said the stewardess.

She was blonde and tall. Her makeup was flawless, and her smile seemed genuine.

“Yeah, apparently there was some sort of issue with a bunch of the tickets,” I replied.

“Yes, I was just notified they resolved the issue. We should be able to take off in time,” she said.

“We better be,” I said with a smile, only half joking.

She smiled back. I winked at her. She blushed, turned, and walked down the aisle, her ass sent slight ripples from her hips down her pantyhose masked thighs with each step. She ran her fingers through her hair, and I sat back.

My luggage was loaded, my carry-on was safely nestled in its cell above my head, and I had a full pack of gum in my pocket, my signature conversation tool.

Out of all the airlines my boss had shoved me on in the five years prior, Southwest was my favorite; although, I’ve never quite understood their lack of first class seating. I’m not some kind of sardine. (If I was, however, I would probably be the aged black ones that the country club stocks just for my Caesar salads.) I’m

willing to pay the extra bones to be treated a little better than everyone else.

Everything seems to have its price these days, and I'm willing to pay it.

"Hello! Thank you for choosing Southwest," said the stewardess. Two men, wearing these light grey, nearly silver, matching robes, walked through the entranceway. They nodded at her and took the two seats closest to the window in the very front right row. The poor bastards obviously had never heard that those seats would be the first ones to burn if anything unfortunate were to happen today. I couldn't help but notice that neither of them had carry-on bags; their hands were empty. I listened to see if I could hear a snippet of a conversation, but they both faced directly forward and didn't seem to be talking at all. I shrugged and sat back again.

"Hello! Thank you for choosing Southwest," the stewardess said as a line of men and women stepped onto the plane. All of the men were wearing khaki pants and grey button-up shirts, and the women accompanying them were wearing identical grey dresses. They marched, in their matching brown leather sandals, silent and in uniform. Their facial features, hair colors, age, and race were all so different from one another, but I still couldn't tell them a part. Cold sweat pearly up on the back of my neck. They began to fill in, one row at a time, seat by seat, in front of me. I tried to make eye contact with one of the women but it was as if I wasn't even there; I've never had a woman ignore me like she did. Something was wrong. My stomach moaned.

Two men filed into my row, and soon the entire plane was filled except the one seat next to the two robed men in the front. Like the robes, none of these people

had carry-on bags, and, even when sitting down, not one of them said a word. I considered moving to the empty seat, closer to the exit, but I hesitated, struck that I stood out so blatantly. I was wearing a green dress shirt, striped tie, and black pants –a rainbow of color compared to the freaks surrounding me. I should have felt elevated, but, in this sea of grey strangeness, I felt horrified.

Keep your cool, Conrad. You've dealt with CEO's packing bigger guns than these people.

"Hello! Thank you for choosing Southwest," the stewardess said one last time as a tall man with thick circular framed glasses walked onto the plane. In any other situation I would have guffawed at the sight of his cobalt blue suit and a ripe, banana yellow tie, but in that moment I felt my body relax. I exhaled.

Now there were two of us.

As his foot fell onto the blue aisle carpet all of the passengers surrounding me stood up. I pushed myself back against the window; they towered over me. The air I pulled through my nostrils was heavy. The man with the yellow tie turned his back on the passengers and bowed toward the stewardess. All of the others bowed behind him, even the robed men who came in first. Yellow Tie turned and raised his hands. He nodded and frowned in such a way that the lines around his eyebrows bulged.

When Yellow Tie took a seat next to the men in robes the passengers echoed his action. The stewardess blushed and began to do the safety precaution demonstration. My heart began to palpitate through my ribcage. A sweat bead slithered down the arch of my nose.

Never before had I felt like the odd one out. In middle school, I was a three-sport athlete. In high school, I was class president. When I got into college, I was the kid with the slack-line and the cool car. In grad school, I was the student with the best teacher evaluations. When I nailed my job, I had all the women in the office flirting with me. I have always had followers, but my followers had always tried so hard to differentiate themselves from one another, although usually failing. Once, during a board meeting I mentioned that my favorite breakfast food was a toasted 'everything' bagel with cream cheese; the next morning I had six of my employees bring me everything bagels. Because of this instance, among others, I had assumed that followers were just followers so they could acquire power through the recognition of their leader. The people around me on this plane ran this assumption off the tracks. No one on the plane seemed like they were followers for power; they were followers for the sake of being uniform, grey, obsolete. The power these people held was not a type of power that one person could hold. It was the kind of power that was only effective in numbers.

I found myself terrified, but what of? A religious group taking some sort of journey? I took a few long, deep breaths, and tried to convince myself that they were on a pilgrimage of self-discovery. They weren't going to me.

Religion is nothing to be afraid of.

"Please sit back in your seats, keep your feet on the ground, all electronic devices off, and all carry-on bags that are not in the head compartments in front of your planted feet," said the stewardess. Her eyes and mine were latched together, and something flickered within hers. She wanted me. Who could blame her? I was

clearly the only one she was going to have a chance with. I made sure my gum was nestled safe in my pocket and my phone turned off –maybe I could get a free drink out of this.

I began to examine the men next to me. One of them had a bald spot the size of a golf ball on the side of his square head, –it was staring right at me- and glasses identical, from what I could tell, to Yellow Tie’s. The other passenger was had fewer wrinkles on his face and a full head of black hair. I tried to look out the window as much as possible, but the men were so unfamiliar to me. They were so easy to look at, to observe. At first glance the two had been one in the same, but as I studied their faces I saw that their differences were bold. Baldy had a serious expression on his face while Black Hair fidgeted like someone who’s never flown before. Baldy’s hands were thick, rugged, with chipped nails and thick black hair growing from the spaces between his knuckles; Black Hair had dainty, hairless fingers, with flawless nails- that is, until he began to bite them.

He’s nervous.

Take-off, as it usually is, was loud and gave me something to look at through my window, but the silence overpowered the noise once again. I turned my head back to look at my row companions. These two were today’s “single serving friends,” as Tyler Durden liked to call them in *Fight Club*. Black Hair began gyrating his left knee, and Baldy put his hand on it. The knee stopped shaking, and Baldy’s eyebrows wrinkled as he glared into Black Hair’s eyes. Black Hair unlatched the rickety white plastic table in front of him, took a piece of the Southwest paper off of the pad in the

seat pocket, grabbed the blue Southwest pen, and began to scribble something. I squinted to see.

"Scared. This real?" Black Hair wrote, and Baldy checked to see if any of the other followers were watching. The coast was clear. Baldy ripped the pen out of Black Hair's fingers and scribbled.

"No question." Baldy's hand spat the pen into Black Hair's lap. He sat back and kept his eyes on the pad. Black Hair looked at Baldy and nodded. Baldy nodded back and looked forward. Black Hair quietly folded up the piece of paper into a tiny cube and shoved it into his mouth.

"What would you gentlemen like to drink this afternoon?" the stewardess asked us. Baldy and Black Hair both shook their heads and looked down.

"I'll have a coffee please," I responded.

"Would you like that black, Mr. Conrad?" She asked.

"Why don't I come back with you and show you how I like it?" I said, mustering up my best bedroom eyes.

"Alright. Let me finish taking all the orders," she said and bit her lip.

I was one of two people who got anything to drink on the entire plane. Yellow Tie ordered something. The stewardess scribbled it down, turned to me, and tilted her head toward the curtain separating the cabin from the passengers. I stood up, scooted past Baldy and Black Hair, and walked down the aisle.

Her arms were around my neck and her lips pressed against mine the second I moved through the curtain. I let her kiss me for a minute, and then we parted.

"Nice lips, legs" I said.

“Not too bad yourself, Mr. Conrad,” she said as she turned and began to pour my coffee. “So just cream, just sugar, or cream and sugar?”

“I like my coffee black,” I said. She laughed and playfully punched my shoulder.

“Handsome and sly,” she said. I thought about giving her my first name, but ‘Mr. Conrad’ was just too sexy coming from her mouth.

“Do you have Bailey’s back here, though?” I asked.

“No, but I do have Disaronno –it’s ten times better in coffee than Bailey’s anyway,” she replied.

“That sounds perfect,” I said.

She kneeled down, opened the liquor fridge, pulled out a nip of Disaronno, poured it into my coffee, and handed me the steaming cup.

“On the house,” she said. I winked at her, and turned to leave.

“Mr. Conrad, where are you going?” she said.

“To my seat where I belong,” I replied and slipped through the curtain. I heard her mutter something profane as I stepped out into the aisle.

Curtains are not sound proof.

I sat down in my seat and sipped on my spiked coffee. The Disaronno made the luke-warm dark roast taste like shit. I pounded the rest of it.

“Would either of you like a piece?” I asked my neighbors as I pulled out my gum. They both shook their heads no and went back looking at their feet.

“So what church are you guys a part of?” I asked.

Black Hair turned his head and looked at me. His eyes, wide and dewy. His lips, white with tightness. He was terrified. Bumps crawled up my arms.

“Are you guys a part of The Church of Latter Day Saints?”

It was the only Church I could think of that was wacked enough to make all its parishioners dress the same. I struck out though because Black Hair shook his head and started gyrating his leg again.

“So what’s the name of your church?” I asked, but Black Hair shook his head and looked away. Sweat beads were forming on his forehead.

After adjusting my chair in a position that felt mildly comfortable I tried to sleep, but between the stillness all the followers shared and the angry stewardess periodically stomping down the aisle kept me awake and alert. Who was I kidding? There was no way I would have slept even if she hadn’t been begging for my attention. I would try to close my eyes, and then I would find myself studying one of my fellow passengers. When one man in the front scratched the top of his head my eyes were there. When a woman behind me sneezed I turned and watched her wipe her nose with a blue Southwest tissue. My clammy hands were shaking. The back of my shirt was cold and damp with sweat.

I tried to focus my attention on something other than the silence, but my mind brought me to the worst of situations.

“They wouldn’t even need a gun. On 9/11 the bastards only had box cutters, for Christ’s sake” I found myself thinking.

When a man cleared his throat behind me. I jumped.

I pulled myself out of my chair and walked down into the cabin. Legs was sitting on the counter, wearing glasses, and playing Sudoku. I startled her when I pulled the curtain aside.

“Oh, Mr. Conrad. Can I help-“

“I can’t be out there anymore,” I said.

“Oh, really?”

“Can I hang out in here for a bit?”

“Mmm. They always come back for some more,” she said, hopped off the counter, and moved towards me.

I let her kiss me for a moment, and then pulled away.

“So what church are they a part of?” I asked.

“Who cares?” she asked and then moved in for my lips. I gave her a peck and then pulled away.

“They can’t talk to me. I tried twice,” I said.

“Maybe they’re intimidated by your good looks,” she said.

“They wouldn’t even take a piece of gum.”

“Mr. Conrad, are you back here to fuck me or are you back here to hide?”

“I’m not hiding, but I’m not here to fuck you. I don’t think I could have sex right now,” I said.

“Alright, well, I’m terribly sorry Mr. Conrad, but passengers aren’t allowed in the cabin. Could you please return to your seat?”

“You don’t want to talk?” I asked.

“Please return to your seat,” she said.

I did as I was told, and sat with a busy mind and a pounding heart. Breathing was uncomfortable. After ten minutes of marinating in the silence I got out of my seat and went to one of the back bathrooms. I couldn't piss, but I washed my hands anyway.

"You're getting old, Conrad. Look at the circles under your eyes, and your skin! It's so pale! You're see-through, for Christ's sake" I said to my reflection.

I opened the door to the bathroom to see Yellow Tie in front of me. I forced a smile and held out my hand.

"Hello, I'm Daniel Conrad" I said.

"Hi. Trake," he said and shook my hand with a firmness that competed with the handshake Steve Jobs offered up to me about ten years ago when the company I worked for back then merged with Apple. I hesitated to move from the door.

"So what church are you and your crew a part of?" I asked, trying to ignore the distracting wart growing from within the outer fold of his left nostril.

"We are The Messengers of the Planet Nabuto," he said.

"Messengers?" I managed, and wondered if all cult leaders had warts.

"Indeed," he said, and motioned that he wanted to get into the stall. I stood my ground.

"I don't see how you can be messengers underneath a vow of silence," I said.

"Many of these people don't carry any respect for those who believe in false idols," he said as he placed a foot inside the stall.

"Kind of ruins the whole 'messenger' thing then, doesn't it?" I said, and stepped outside of the stall.

“We relay the truth in action, not word,” he replied.

“What kind of action’s are we talking about, here?” I said. For the first time in years I heard my voice shake. I puffed up my chest and stood tall, but Trake just smiled and stepped into the stall, shutting the door behind him.

One hell of an action.

“What kind of message am I supposed to get from that?” I said through the door and waited for an answer that never came.

I walked back to my seat to see that Baldy had taken the window seat, leaving me the place on the aisle.

“I’m sorry I’ve been getting up so much, but that gives you no reason to take my seat,” I said.

Baldy closed his eyes and tipped his head back against the seat. Black Hairs right leg started bouncing again.

“I wouldn’t fight it,” I heard Trake’s voice murmur behind me. I turned to face him.

“And why is that, exactly?” I said, but Trake just stared at me with empty eyes. I turned back to Baldy.

“You know, the window is actually the worst place to sit,” I lied, “there’s been numerous times, just this year, when a window has cracked and sucked the person sitting closest to it out.”

Baldy kept his eyes closed.

“Mr. Conrad, please sit down.” The stewardess was walking towards us.

“Thank you, Miss,” said Trake as he passed. The stewardess shot me a dirty look before turning and heading back to the fuck factory she called a cabin.

What a bitch.

I found myself immersed in the silence again. There was nothing left to do but people watch.

Trake put his hands in the air and stretched. As his hands went up every one of the followers adjusted themselves in their seats. I saw the heads of two women, sitting in the row directly across from Yellow Tie and the Robes, bobbing and shaking. One woman passed something across the aisle to a fellow follower sitting in the row behind Yellow Tie. The other woman passed something over the top of her own seat to the follower behind her. The objects were being passed from follower to follower. I could see their heads bobbing and turning, hands reaching over the backs of the seats. The once still and silent plane was jittering and loud. No one spoke, but feet tapped and clothing hissed as it rubbed against the seats. Baldy finally got a hold of one of the objects. The followers had been passing around two green prescription bottles. Baldy took out a grey pill, held it in his hand, and passed the bottle to Black Hair who did the same. Black Hair passed the bottle back to the women who sat behind us, clenched his hand around the pill, pushed his head up against the back of the seat, and began shaking his leg again.

I gulped, and felt my forehead beading up again. My heart punched the inside of my chest. I starting breathing in time to the rhythm of Black Hair’s foot tapping the floor. Four taps for the inhale, six for the exhale. I put my hand on his knee this time.

“You’re driving me insane,” I said.

“You have no fucking idea,” he replied in a cracking low voice; his lips were quivering.

“What’s going on?” I said, but he just shook his head and heightened the steady beat of his foot tapping.

Trake stood up and stepped into the aisle. The Robes stood up, and positioned themselves on either side of him. His brows were furrowed, forehead wrinkles in full bloom. A red splotch in his skin sat on the outmost corner of his left eye. He opened his mouth and began to preach.

“It has been four years since you have all come together to worship the real power, the real forgiveness, the true leader.” Trake shouted. “I am standing before you at thirty-five thousand feet above the commoners and the misled. You, my people, you are the people who believe in the truth, and to the truth you all shall rise today.” The Robes stomped their feet just as he finished.

All of Trake’s followers stood up in cadence with his verbal rhythm. I looked at all of them standing around me, an entire plane of them were just fucking standing around me, silent, rigid, waiting. What were they going to do next? Black Hair’s breathing was getting increasingly louder, making me become conscious of my own breathing. I needed water. Something.

I looked to the back of the plane to see the stewardess peeking out from behind the curtain that separates the back cabin from the aisle. Her eyes searched, rapid, for an explanation. Her face was draining all color. We made eye contact, and I

forced myself to relax, but only until she looked away. From the expression she shot me, she might have been more horrified than I was.

Trake's followers broke the silence.

"We believe in the stars and the sky, the solar system, and the absolute demise of human faith," the followers chanted.

"Please, everybody, sit down, please, it's dangerous!" shouted the stewardess, but her pleas went unnoticed. She ran down the aisle and stopped in front of Trake.

"Tell your people to sit down. This is an offense punishable by United States law," she spat at him, fists clenched.

Trake looked away from her and back at his followers standing behind her.

He nodded.

"Please be real. Please be real. Please be real," murmured Black Hair to himself. Baldy's face went scarlet, he slowly shook his head.

"Your old families and friends will succumb to burning fire of remembrance when word gets to the evil news stations about our holy journey," shouted Trake.

"You are all the silent messengers of the highest power."

"Excuse me," said the stewardess, but the followers just chanted over her.

It was as if they could only see each other.

"We will not turn back to our old ways. We will not become part of the ill-greased machine society expects us to become," his followers chanted.

The stewardess pushed past Trake and his men and scurried through the front curtain. Trake made it seem as if he didn't even take notice. Did he?

“Now rise into space and become the gaseous flaming star that I have told you that you are,” shouted Trake, and all of his followers raised their hands to their lips and swallowed whatever pill came out of the green prescription jar that was passed around earlier.

“Hello, this is your captain, please be seated immediately,” said a crackling voice over the loud speakers. “We are about to hit some turbulence, and if you do not comply you will be held accountable by the state.”

The Robes stomped their feet again, and all of his followers sat down. The plane began to shake, and my stomach roared. The Robes sat down in their seats. I wiped my forehead and tried to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. Black Hair’s breathing was getting louder and louder, more uneven with every breath.

The stewardess peaked her head out from behind the curtain, and saw that everyone was sitting down. She made eye contact with me. I shrugged and shook my head.

She slipped back behind the curtain.

Black Hair’s breathing was sniffley. I looked over to his face was red and puffy. Tears were falling from his eyes.

“Do you need a tissue?” I asked him, and grabbed the blue pack of Southwest tissues out of the compartment in front of me. I offered them his way.

Baldy’s hands raised as if he was going to strike Black Hair, but instead he vomited bile of a yellowish grey hue. This would have been far less terrible if he hadn’t done so into his lap. I gagged, and threw the tissues onto Baldy’s soaked lap.

The ultimate domino effect then began.

I turned to see a man behind me vomiting on his feet, the woman sitting next to him rubbing his back, her eyes were rolling in and out of the back of her head. The rank stench of the vomit began to cover all other smells around me. I gagged again and looked at Black Hair.

“You may want to go into the cabin. Everyone is going to make a meh-“ started Black Hair. He was unable to finish his sentence before he vomited all over himself. The crumpled up note he had written earlier, now covered in stomach slime, grabbed onto his pants and held on. He slumped forward and began dry heaving.

I stood up, stepped out of our row, and walked toward the curtain that the stewardess disappeared into. I pulled the curtain aside and saw her down a nip of Disarono.

“Mr. Conrad, please go back to your seat. This is harassment. I will get a restraining order on you if I must,” she said.

“Do your fucking job. They’re committing a group suicide out there. You can’t smell that foul smell?” I said.

“What?” she hiccupped.

“Do something. They took some sort of pill. All of them except Trake, uhh, the one in the suit,” I managed.

“I don’t believe it,” she said and opened the curtain. Once she realized what she was seeing –the women in the front were covered in each others vomit, hunched

over, limp, leaning on each other, a man in the back was dry heaving, painfully grunting- she screamed and pulled the curtain shut.

“I’m going to have to go tell the captain,” she said and pushed her way through a door after entering some sort of code. I turned and took another look at his dying followers on the other side of the curtain.

There was vomit in the aisles, and, as I pushed my head out further, I smelled the distinct stench of defecation. The air was thick with the sour, vile odors. I gagged and covered my mouth and nose.

Jesus Christ.

Only three of the followers were moving any longer: two women in the third row were coughing and the man who was dry heaving loudly minutes before was rolling from side to side in the aisle, groaning. The rest looked as though they were sleeping, but I knew it wasn’t so. The Men in the robes were staring at me, one of them bore his canine teeth in an amused grin, the other picked me apart, piece-by-piece, with his eyes. Everything began to spin, and I stepped back behind the curtain. The stewardess touched my shoulder.

“Are.. are they all dead?” she asked.

“Most of them,” I said,

“How horrible,” she said and she stepped back into the captain’s cabin, white faced. I grabbed a nip of Smirnoff she had left on the counter and put it back.

The curtain moved aside. Trake stepped into the cabin.

“Is this action sufficient enough?” he said.

“To land you right in jail? Why, yes. Yes it is, Mr. Trake,” I said, nodding my head. “I’ve read about people like you. You lead them to believe that you’re the fucking savior of humankind, get them to donate all their assets to your phony cause, and then you give them some poison to suck on,” I said, my hands shaking. He stepped closer to me. I held my ground.

“Actually, Mr. Conrad, they donated all of their assets to me so that I could travel and save more ignorant people,” he said as he rummaged through his pocket. “I am here to teach not harm. I have come to Earth embodied as one of you. You’re being misled.” He pulled out a business card and offered it my way.

“I bet you drive a Mercedes and live in a seven story beachside mansion in Miami,” I said as I pushed his hand away. “Saving the ignorant my ass.”

Trake smirked, put the business card back into his pocket, and traded it for a nip of Smirnoff that he must have ordered earlier. He downed it, and threw the plastic bottle onto the floor. Miss Stewardess came out of the door to the captain’s room.

“NOPE! NOPE! GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY CABIN. Sit down with all your fucking victims in their waste and stench you, you, you fucking MONSTER,” she screamed.

“The only monster on Earth is denial,” said Trake. “However, by your standards it may be conformity.”

He turned and left.

“I- I’m not sure what to do, Mr. Conrad,” she said. I shrugged and turned away. I wasn’t done talking with Trake.

I gagged immediately as I stepped into the aisle. The air was curdled with an ungodly stench that put most city dumps to shame, even the Men's bathroom at the sleaziest dance club in Atlanta didn't compete with the scent that Trake's dead and dying followers had produced.

Trake was sitting alone in his row. The robes sat behind him, and to my surprise they were lifeless and covered in multi-colored vomit. I sat down in one of the vacant seats.

"You killed your main men, too?" I asked him.

"They felt that their duty to mankind had been fulfilled. They ascended on their own," Trake replied.

"Why do they feel the need to ascend from this life, exactly?"

"Mr. Conrad, have you ever noticed the lack of freedom you have in your life?" Trake said.

"No. I have not," I replied.

"That is because you have been taught, very well might I add, that you are not to question the boundaries and chains that shackle you into the constructs of society," he said.

"I'm not following," I said. "I was able to get a formal education. I chose my own jobs. I created my own goals. I am able to retire at the age of 47 years old, Trake. I have nothing 'shackling' me down. The only thing that shackles anyone down in this country is laziness, or, of course, their class."

"You are mistaken, Mr. Conrad," he began. "You paid an arm and a leg for an education that teaches you nothing. You were given a notarized piece of paper that

you believed could bring you anywhere, guarantee you any job you pleased. You found a job, you climbed the ladder that was in front of you, and you reached the top. What was all of that for exactly? What kind of success does any of that bring? When you die, Mr. Conrad, no one will remember any of the presentations that you worked on. No one will remember anything except who you were, objectively, as a person. You are fenced in by the false expectations of those around you.”

“I don’t care how people remember me,” I said. “I’ll be dead. Why would I care what they think of me when I’m dead?”

“Because the only thing that will ever truly last forever is your legacy,” he said.

“I can have kids and instill my values inside of them. They will live on after I die.”

“So your values will live on and you will not,” he said to me, and I gave up. He was clearly not going to budge from his radical position. I decided to question the events of that day.

“Where are they ascending to?” I motioned to the remnants of his followers surrounding us.

“Quite frankly it doesn’t matter, Mr. Conrad,” He began. “These people are going to be remembered for decades and decades after today.”

“Because they killed themselves in honor of a nut job,” I replied.

“They will be remembered for much longer than you will. They will be recognized more in your lifetime than you will ever be.”

I put my head against the chair and sighed. My stomach was churning and my head was spinning. It could have been the smell, or the lights, or even the fact that there were nearly a hundred dead bodies surrounding me, but I believe it was the fact that Trake was right. I was going to die and no one would remember all the hours I sacrificed for higher paychecks. I was going to be forgotten, and for the first time ever, I was aware of it and quite bothered.