

## Before Your Eyes

In the two and a half minutes just before you know you're going to die, you have enough time to mourn, which is strange because you've always thought of mourning as something that takes place over months and years. That's how you hear about it. Someone being in mourning, and they remain that way, depressed and sad for a substantial amount of time, like grieving over the loss of a child or a spouse, or even a pet sometimes. You get the feeling that the time period required is indefinite, like it might never end, but, of course, this mourning will be no more than momentary.

Blue sky flashes out the window and then a burst of brown and green, and nothing is yet distinct, so there must be some amount of time left, but not nearly enough to wallow in. Perhaps it's better this way. You think of your other brushes with death, long before there was anything in your life worth missing, like that time you fell climbing. There was the snap of the sandstone breaking loose in your hand, and then a sick, out of control feeling, and then pain. Nothing flashed before your eyes, because there was nothing worth flashing. You were a college kid climbing beyond your skill level on a beer soaked road trip to Nevada, and anyway, you'd survived with only minor injuries. No harm done. No real time to contemplate how close you were (a half body rotation) to death.

Later, there was the cancer scare, and that one had shaken you more. A melanoma the size of a pencil eraser on the back of your leg. They'd had to do surgery then, to remove the tissue, a wide area excision, and then they'd removed your lymph node to see whether the cells had metastasized. It had taken a couple of days before they called to give the results, and those days had been frantic. What if it had already spread? What if there was only a year to live. What if you needed chemo? What would your wife do? There was no insurance money if you died, and she was a teacher. She'd never be able to afford the mortgage on her own.

And there was your son to think about. Just two years old. Was he about to lose his father? Would he grow up without any real memories of you? Would she replace you with someone? That

would be best, you'd supposed, but the thought of it tore into you a hook in the stomach. You'd be gone, and then you'd be replaced, forgotten. Some way off in the future, someone would say, "What does your dad do?" and Your son would say, "My dad's dead." And then everyone would apologize and he'd say, "It's okay, I never really knew him anyway."

He'd have friends, a girlfriend or maybe a boyfriend, and you'd never get to dispense all the advice you'd saved for him, never be able to watch him as he fell in love or found his passion. He'd do all of it without you. And she would forget you, too, eventually.

At first she'd mourn, she'd grieve, she'd wear black and tear her clothes, but then she'd heal, and she was too beautiful, too sweet and caring to be alone. She didn't belong in the world alone, and eventually, she would meet someone, and she'd realize all those things she thought only you could give her, all the ways she'd felt that were so unique, the feeling of special knowledge, the intimacies of marriage, the pains and regrets you hide from almost everyone, she'd find someone else to meet her needs, someone else to know her as only you had, someone else to be the only thing in the world to her. And eventually, he would know more, much more, about her than you ever did because he was still alive, because he had time, oceans of time with her and you would be a faded memory.

And then the call came, and you were clear, free of cancer, and the relief, the weight of it lifting from you made you want to renew your marriage vows, to swear off work and travel the world, and love her as you'd never loved her before, and you swore to spend more time with your son, to teach him how to throw a baseball, to really pay attention to all the little moments that happen every day and pass without so much as a photograph to hold them down.

You'd wanted to change your life so that it mattered, so that when you left it, there wouldn't be an empty shell to be filled by anyone, but an edifice that could never be removed, so you quit your job to stay home with your son, intending to learn Spanish together from one of those computer programs and learn to play guitar and write a book, and that lasted for a month, just under, because you didn't

have the patience for music, and because he cried when he found out you were keeping him home instead of taking him to daycare to be with his friends, and because instead of writing the great American novel, you spent most of the day watching trashy reruns of Jersey Shore and eating potato chips. So you begged your old job back and picked up where you left off, a little wiser, a little more contemplative, taking time, when you remembered, to chew your food and enjoy the flavor, being a little more patient with your son, kissing your wife more firmly on the lips when she got home from work. Not an edifice, but perhaps less of a shell.

And now this. Now there are no excuses. Now, you have two minutes, less because you've wasted some of it reliving old griefs, to find whatever meaning there is in your life, because this time there will be no reprieve. This time you are going to die.

The plane lurches again, and you see the beautiful, cloudless, blue sky. How peaceful it looks, like summer's day. An illusion. You've heard the blue of the sky isn't truly blue. Only a certain wavelength of light bending just so through the earth's atmosphere, like we're caught in one lane of an enormous, cosmic rainbow.

Next to you, a woman is holding her shrieking baby. You'd cursed under your breath when you'd seen her there in the middle seat holding her kid like a giant loaf of bread. That thing is going to scream all the way to Dusseldorf, you'd thought, and he had, starting as soon as the plane lifted off the runway. His mother had fed him, rocked him, pushed past you into the aisle to walk him up and down, been shepherded back to her seat by a flight attendant who told her that all passengers must be seated because the plane was about to encounter turbulence.

And then the kid had miraculously stopped crying, just as the plane began to bounce, and you'd shared a small smile with his mother, who was clearly relieved. And then the pilot had come out of the cockpit, and a few minutes later, the plane had dived toward the earth in one, smooth, sweeping arc, and the kid had started shrieking again.

Across the aisle, a man is throwing up into a white, paper sack. You can't hear it over the sound of the plane and the crying baby, but the sharp smell of vomit is drifting through the cabin. The flight attendants are trying to get the drink cart back into its little slot after it came rolling out when the plane changed directions abruptly. The pilot is hammering on the door of the cockpit, screaming something in German. The woman in front of you has actually gone back to reading her book as if her only goal before she dies is to find out how *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* ends.

The flight attendants manage to latch the drinks cart into its alcove. Good, you think. That way it won't bounce around the cabin and cause more damage when we crash. You are visited by a sudden desire to laugh, but you're not sure you could stop if you started. In fact you know you'd dissolve into hysterical sobbing if you let yourself go. But why shouldn't you? Why even try to keep it together right now? It's not going to matter. You could unbuckle your seatbelt and run down the aisle screaming, and you'd still die. Everyone on the plane is going to die. You wish the flight attendants would get that drinks cart back out and start chucking miniature booze bottles down the rows. That would be the sanest thing to do at this point. Give us all a drink.

In the back of your mind you realize there's not nearly enough time for that. The pilot runs by. Maybe he's headed for the exit, but of course, there are no parachutes on commercial planes. Perhaps that's a design flaw. There could be an eject button, and the whole plane could split in half and launch all the passengers out into empty space. Maybe each seat could have a parachute built in. The mother next to you would be out of luck. There's no way you could hold onto an infant during an eject sequence, but the rest of you would probably make it as long as no one was going to the bathroom. Maybe the toilet could have a parachute too.

The pilot stumbles back up the aisle carrying a fire axe. Where do they keep *that*? you wonder. The plane shifts and he lurches sideways into the man who is now taking a break from vomiting. You see the axe make contact and now there's blood all over the seat, and the man is holding his hands to

the side of his head. The pilot doesn't stop. He pushes up the aisle toward the cockpit door without a second glance, but another man from a few rows up, unbuckles his seatbelt and comes back to try and help. He pulls the man's hands away and looks at the gash. In a few moments none of this is going to matter, but the new man looks around as though there might be a first aid kit hanging on the wall somewhere. There isn't. Instead, he takes off his sweater and starts to wrap it around the bleeding man's head. You notice he's stepped on the sick bag, and vomit is getting on his nice, leather oxfords.

You hear a dull thud over the din and look up to see the pilot trying to chop his way into the cockpit. The baby next to you is crying harder than ever, and you look over to see his mother gripping him tightly to her chest. You hold out your hands. "Let me take him," you say in a reassuring voice. She looks at you like you're eight kinds of crazy, but you see her grip loosen just a bit. "Please," you say. "It's going to be alright." She looks back at you, and her eyes are wide with terror, but she holds her son out, and you wrap your arms around him, and put his face next to yours. He looks a little bit like your son used to at that age, and for a moment, you remember what it was like to hold your own son like this, your son who's not here, but home with his own mother, and thank god for that. He's thirteen, now, and he can throw a baseball and speak a little Spanish, a little more than you can.

You think of his mother, the hair, beautiful, shining chestnut, and smelling inexplicably like cinnamon. You remember her face with the lines as they are now, laugh lines, smile lines, and you realize that no one else will know how each of them was made, how you reshaped each other's bodies with all of your contact, how even in your absence, you'll be there, with her in the negative space of her life. Maybe she'll find someone else. She should, but they won't fill the particular void you've left. You'll always be there between them, and you hold back your tears because you've never realized it before. Because it should be that way. Because it's right, but so incredibly sad and brutal.

"Shhhh," you say. "Shhhh. It's alright." And for just a second, the child in your arms stops crying, and his mother smiles at you. These small kindnesses leave you somehow breathless with

wonder, and you hear the pilot sobbing and smell vomit worse than ever, and the plane's engine whines louder than it has been, and there's a lurch like maybe the plane is righting itself.