

Bad Weather, Not Flown Around

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He hauled aside the shower curtain and winced. Was this normal? It certainly wasn't for him. Normal, to be cleaning. He never cleaned. Ever. He couldn't even decide exactly why he would clean, the bathroom for instance, let alone whether it needed cleaning or not. He certainly didn't want them coming in and thinking he was a slob—dysfunctional—in any way. Or maybe it was more that he didn't want to leave them any evidence, and none of himself in particular. And that was another peculiar development. He'd leave his apartment very neat every time now, all clothes put away, all the dishes not only clean, but out of the dishwasher and in the cupboards. But the bathroom, this was something new. The cleaning woman came every two weeks and did it. He'd fax or email her his schedule and she'd come when he wasn't there. But what if they came before she did? He put it to himself this way; if they were to come, of course he hoped they wouldn't have to, but if they did, it would be within the next 72 hours. He figured the cleaning lady wouldn't show before they did, he'd only been home this time for three days. He roughly rummaged for the cleanser, irritated. What the hell was he doing? Ah, found it...thinking now...he jerked up and put the cleanser down. He'd only taken two showers since he'd been back this time. The shower wasn't dirty. It didn't need cleaning. And he would be the next person to come into this apartment, not the cleaning lady, and certainly not them. He was certain of it. He was only going to be gone one day this time. One

day. He stood staring at the tile floor, thoughtful, thoughtless. He'd be away for one day, two at the most...unless... He swiped up the cleanser and the sponge and hurriedly wiped out the bathtub and shower walls. Whatever. He felt better. He felt complete now, or more ready, or something. Whatever. He'd only be gone one or two days this time. He'd be back soon. The best part was coming back, that ride home in the car service car when he'd smoke half a cigarette out the open window and feel all that relief.

Right now he had to pull himself together. It was almost time to go. The car would be here soon. No breakfast. Wasn't he hungry? It was becoming more and more difficult to eat now before one of his trips. It's not that he wasn't hungry, he should be hungry, he just couldn't eat or drink anything. Except coffee, but that was the worst. Nervous. He should quit the coffee.

It was almost time to go. On the way out of the bathroom to the kitchen area of his studio apartment he moved along the wall to the window and looked out. Up at the sky. It would be a nice day. The sun was just coming up. There might be wind, though. He mumbled that the weather wasn't his concern, or, rather, it certainly was, as a matter of fact it was extremely important, that is, it was and it wasn't, he needn't be concerned about it right this minute, and what was he doing staring out at the sky anyway? You couldn't tell what conditions were like really, by looking outside. What's this now, obsessing about the weather? Tricking himself into walking by the window? Foolish. It looked like a calm clear day. Squinting, it looked like a calm, clear day. It looked very calm out there. Maybe a little breezy. Maybe not. How breezy? Wincing slightly, leaning forward to catch a glimpse of the trees which lined the street far below, bumping his head against the glass. Stepping back, staring out the window, straight ahead and into the short sky that was visible from his picture window. Could the space out there even be considered the sky? Humans lived up here. He lived up here. Shouldn't there be a name for this air, this probably noxious space that is high up but not at all ethereal? What would it be called? Sub-sky-terrain. Above-ground-aerial-corridor. Sub-aerial-space. Where did the sky start? He, of all people should be qualified to answer that. There had been a time when he'd been oblivious to the condition of his apartment, to the scene of urban/suburban sprawl and the pathetic sky outside his hi-rise when he left it every few days, to the weather outside as he started out on a trip.

In the kitchen he did the dishes. Two glasses. Three including the demitasse from his third espresso of the morning. He rarely ate at home. Except coffee. He wanted to leave everything pristine. No, not pristine, but clean. Just in case. In case what? He lived alone. No one had a

key except the cleaning lady. They would get in, though, if necessary, of course. Agents. Investigators. Officials. But they weren't coming in before him. They weren't. The likelihood, the odds, of that happening were a longshot to say the least. Worse than winning the lottery. He should know this, too. He hated it when he got onto the odds thing with himself. It was a futile train of thought, which he was completely powerless to stop. He knew to just let it run full steam ahead, while he tried to ignore it. The odds of x, or worse, y happening are greater than being struck by lightning. Besides, if it's going to happen there was not a whole hell of a lot he could do to stop it. Well, actually there were many many things he could do, as a matter of fact, he was the one who would be presumably doing those things which would stop it from happening, if it was going to happen, depending upon what kind of situation it was. Of course it didn't do any good to project like this, to think about it before it happened. The odds were so against it. Stacked against it.

He snatched up the television remote and surfed to CNN. He had experienced a new and rather perverse in his view, sense of psychiatric relief the last few times there were major disasters on the news. They had involved plane crashes—TWA Flight 800, Swissair One-Eleven, that suicidal Egyptian Boeing 767—each of which had inspired a sense of low calm, a break so to speak, from the suspicious neurosis that had begun to form around him like barnacles to the side of a ship. For weeks afterward he'd been able to leave everything at home as it was during that time. Unmade bed, dirty dishes, dirty clothes. There'd been hurricanes and blizzards, lightning, wind and ice, bomb threats and security breaches he'd barely noticed. He couldn't do that today if his life depended on it. If his life depended on it. How could he say that? Now he was cleaning up because his life depended on it. He expertly scanned the news channels now for some alert, bulletin, programming to be interrupted for a live feed to some devastated site. Nothing. Talking heads, smiling slightly, certainly not reporting hundreds killed, then commercials. No disaster today, at least not before he had to leave. He took a deep breath. There are thousands of TVs at the airport. There was still time. Time for something to happen and all televisions, all tuned to different channels, to suddenly cut to the same thing, a horrible scene of utter devastation complete with saddened anchor-person and striking red banner and capitalized disaster word. He scanned more channels, stopping at the Weather Channel, knowing damn well that his watching the weather on TV meant nothing, that this wasn't the weather he needed to be concerned with. He had started to play this trick on himself, where he is reduced in rank for the time being to a regular person,

a civilian who watches the weather to know what to wear for the day, or to wonder about an umbrella or not. He knew this was bullshit. He can't use this weather. This is bullshit weather, however comforting. A lie. The weather he needs can't be acquired from the TV set. He'll get the weather soon whether he wants it or not. And it won't joke and smile. It will be serious meteorology that he'll have to deal with. It is with a tinge of terror now that he imagines that imminent moment when all vast and real-time locally occurring meteorological phenomena will be his concern and his alone. The weatherman is reporting a calm and clear day. Bullshit. Smiling, get outside everybody, it looks like a beautiful day. Bullshit. What he wouldn't give for a monster tornado or killer hurricane right now. Or better yet, a devastating earthquake or nuclear power plant accident. A radiation leak. Everyone stay indoors at all costs. Nobody leave their homes. Very dangerous outside. Stay indoors with your TVs on.

He squeezed off the TV, but not before moving to a channel he never watched, any one of the big networks would do. Generic. No clues for them. They would want to know everything, even the last thing he'd seen on television. Late, he had to get going. The car must be downstairs.

At the airport he catches glimpses of the TV monitors as he tries to stride confidently through the terminal. His overnight case is missing a wheel and he has to hold the handle a certain way so the bag doesn't drag along the floor on the one side. He'd been meaning to get a new one, however, convinced each flight would be his last, it hadn't exactly been a priority. His eyes darted from one TV monitor to the next. Nothing happening. As he came up on his departure gate he hastened his step and swooped up his suitcase by the side handle. Eyeing the television monitors, he entered his departure lounge and strode up to the front of the waiting line of passengers. They were boarding First Class already. Nodding to the gate agents, he was waved through to the ramp with the others.

Upon entering the darkened jetway he stopped, physically unable to step forward. He was going to die today. First Class passengers maneuvered around him. Was someone or something trying to get a message to him? Is this the way it happens with everyone only they don't pay attention?

Stranded half-way down the jetway he could make out through a small, scratchy plastic window that the aircraft he was boarding was a logo-jet, that is, its entire outside surface had been sold as advertising to, in this case, some entertainment conglomerate. He leaned to the side and pressed his face to the window. Squinting down 200 feet of fuselage, he could make

out the giant and distorted but no less ridiculous faces of four famous cartoon characters goofily grinning and frantically waving out at nothing, the wasteland of the airport tarmac. A huge TV show logo ran over half the length of the aircraft from above the forward door to well past the exit doors on the wings. The background color of the whole plane was a screaming bright yellow from nose to tail. He thought it oddly fitting, even paranoically prophetic that he be boarding this particular aircraft. Cowering inside, unsafe, he nonetheless forced himself down the jetway and up to the open door of the plane.

Flight attendants were busy stocking the galley. He bent down at the threshold of the airplane door, ostensibly to tie one of his shoes. There was still time for some disastrous event to occur, man-made he hoped, which could release him, however temporarily. It was as if he needed a disaster, someone else's of course, to live freely, if only for a short time. Or it could even be his own catastrophe. Perhaps if he was a part of one, first-hand, and could survive, he could be free forever. At least get back to the way he was. An accident, survivable for some and very random, for he knew he didn't have the courage to perpetrate the kind of event necessary to fulfill this order. To live freely. It would very likely turn out to be, irony of ironies of course, a suicide. Which he was not at all interested in. It was remaining alive that he seemed to be so desperately preoccupied with.

Behind the open flap of his jacket, the gesture hidden from sight, he laid his right hand squarely against the outside skin of the airplane. He closed his eyes, mumbling a jumbled prayer which he didn't know all the words to. Eyes shut for a second or two more, then with creaking knees and sweating palms he buttoned his jacket and struggled back to his feet. Stepping onto the aircraft, he curtly acknowledged the flight attendants, and, not looking at them, not wanting their attention, went left instead of right, away from the passenger cabin and through the cramped corridor leading to the cockpit. Then in the cockpit, leaning, steadying himself with a hand on a seatback, wrangling himself around the controls, knocking his head against the overhead instrument panel, sinking into the left seat of his Boeing MD-11, the Captain settled down into the deep sheepskin seat covering, shut his eyes and let his head spin.

According to my mother, who knew him a whole two weeks before she married him in 1960, my father was 'merely' selfish and narcissistic, a charismatic fighter pilot with whom she was deeply infatuated. After the Air Force, among his few different jobs in civilian aviation he flew business jets for a small airline. To me, his eldest child, he was a laughing hero, standing in the doorway in his pilot uniform; my mother says How was your flight, dear? Not bad, not bad, he always replied, even if he had crash-landed, as happened once. Flight. Forever I thought my mother had made this word up. To me it is my parents' little joke, a funny code-word they have, like the pet names they have for each other that sound like they come from a different language.

We live in a small hamlet of about 200 people in a farm community on the outskirts of Toronto, Canada, not far from a small airport which Dad flies out of. He often strays from his flight plan to buzz our house in his business jet. We hear the engines and run out of the house waving. He tilts the wings back and forth to tell us it is him. As if small jets fly low over our tiny village all the time. My mother hates it when he does this; she has visions of him crashing right into our house.

When I am four, my mother has my little brother. She says she doesn't know where my father was when she gave birth. I don't know if she means that she has no clue, or that he was on a flight, working. They named my brother after him anyway, Robert Murray. I remember Mom coming home from the hospital through the back door of our house with Little Murray in her arms. I tried to stretch up to see his face. I like him. He's so little. I think Dad likes him too, likes all of us, although I'm not sure. He throws Little Murray way in the air and catches him and my mother does not watch. She is always making backwards sucking noises with her mouth when my father plays with us. We like it though. We make him climb down the stairs on his hands and knees with us on his back. Or he pushes us really high on a swing which hangs from a tree beside the house. If we tell him not to push too high, he'll push higher than ever. I always think I'll go flying onto the dirt driveway and break my head open, but I never do.

Dad comes home from trips in his uniform and briefcase and we freak out not only because he usually brings us stuff, but also because Mom can never tell us exactly when he's coming back. Before a trip, while we're driving him to the airport I put my orders in for certain things, and he always brings something completely different, which I have to settle for, according to him. I suppose some of my bigger requests, a horse for instance, might have been a bit difficult to fulfill between the cockpit and the parking lot.

The airport is always lonely and dusty. I know that there are people that work there but I never really see any of them. Weeds try to grow everywhere that they can't, and Dad always runs from the car through the gate to the airplane once we drop him off. He never walks. Sometimes the engines are already running and I can see the boiling hot air shooting out the back. Dad showed me how to look for it, and explained to me how the engines burn gas and thrust out hot air to push the airplane forward. We stay until Dad takes off, I hang on the chainlink fence and watch his plane bounce down the runway. It moves like a toy, like it's not very heavy at all, then takes off so easily, like it's made of paper. Dad tilts the wings for us as he shoots up into the sky. After its quiet again and his plane is a dot in the sky the airport feels extra lonely. We drive home and pass the straggly cement field with the bright orange-striped windsock, standing all by itself except for the same colored bright orange-and-white striped telephone poles that border the airport past the end of the runway.

Its much more exciting to go and pick Dad up, especially if we get to the airport before he lands. We try and guess which airplane coming in is him. Dad says to never go up to an

airplane until the engines are turned off, and especially never go behind one, but we aren't allowed to go past the fence anyway. We watch him drive the plane to its parking spot and it usually sits there for a while before anybody comes out. Dad is tall, and bald except for thick sideburns and a ring of thick dark hair which starts halfway down, all around the bottom half of his head. As he scoops me up to say hello, I check the front and very top of his head for new cuts and scrapes. He almost always has some. And sometimes bloody. He explains that he bumped his head in the plane, that the cockpit is too small for him and jammed with stuff. I think this is funny, that he would bump his head every single time he gets in or out of a plane. My mother throws him a cross look as he gets in the car. He says it's OK, his hat hides it, see?, and throws on his pilot cap, tilting it neatly over whatever new scrape or bruise he has that day.