

This Is Your Captain Speaking

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I AM RETURNING FROM a conference at the University of Illinois, and I rise early on a Saturday morning to take a short jog before a day of travel. It is a bright, cold, autumn dawn, and the campus is deserted; a white mist stands above the frosted grass. I stretch for half an hour, have coffee, read the paper, and succeed in missing my flight.

This can perhaps be forgiven. The airport is only slightly larger than an airplane, and I arrive twenty-nine and a half minutes early for a puddle-jumping commuter flight to Detroit, only to watch the desk attendant for the airline close the door behind him as he disappears—leaving a sign saying that the flight has closed thirty minutes prior to departure. This regulation is apparently a new security measure.

It is a big, wide-open prairie day under a huge sky. Illinois feels perfectly empty. The single, lonely boarding-card machine (which I accost, experiencing a creeping dread) tells me to see the attendant.

Thus begins a small, sad masquerade, as I stand with my roller suitcase, making earnest, plaintive, and respectfully voluble requests for assistance about twenty-five feet from the “gate” that I am not permitted to approach (since I don’t have a boarding card). The eight or nine good, obedient, punctual passengers—seated in the “boarding lounge” directly in front of me—try not to notice. It is clear that this sort of performance has been witnessed many times by the half-dozen employees of the airport, who look at me (and, as much as they can, away from me) with an air of remote sympathy: several security personnel, the lady who sells coffee and Danishes, a kindly custodian. It takes fifteen minutes for my pleas to peter into resignation (I briefly try truculence, but it is clear that the bored guards are itching to be heroes, and I would make a tidy little opportunity), and about then the good passengers file onto the tiny plane (by rows), the doors close, and off it goes. I see my empty seat in my mind’s eye with indelible clarity.

Later I figure out that this was Northwest's last flight out of Urbana-Champagne for the day, so I walk over and buy a ticket home on American, consoling myself (and it is no small consolation) that I have remained in the sphere of problems that can be solved with money.

The solicitous American agent, having been a spectator of my tragicomedy, takes pity and gives me excellent seats back to New York through Chicago. Soon I am aboard another small plane, taking my place in a solo first row spot, directly facing the flight attendant, a young black woman in a jump seat. No sooner have I stowed my bag and taken out my book than her voice—quiet, high, plain—seems to be posing a question.

"Do you write books?" she is asking, so faintly that she could be mumbling to herself.

"Yes," I answer. I explain that I teach history and write history books, communicating complimentary surprise at her intuition. She smiles, and turns away, pressing a button that cues a comforting voice, which begins to inform us about the safety features of our craft. She pantomimes the familiar gestures of security and deliverance at my side.

A few moments later, when she is again seated before me, she leans forward and speaks over the roar of the engines that are separating us from the earth.

"Do you believe in God?" she asks.

♦ ♦ ♦

This is the United States of America, a glorious and strange place that I love. We are flying and we are talking about God in America, and so I say yes, yes I do.

Then, by way of friendly amplification, I offer that a formal Catholic training is probably what drew me to the kind of history I study—the history of science—where, among other things, the task is to try to understand how certain new explanations of natural phenomena helped undo people's commitments to supernatural beings and spiritual presences.

All of this is sort of true. Not wholly true. But definitely not what could fairly be called false.

And then she says: "When my father died, I had a dream that he was going to be leaving, and then he had a heart attack right in front of my face, and I saw the Angels of Death come for his soul and they were nine feet tall. And I have a power to see those who are going to die, and I know it. And when my friend, he got shot, the night he got shot, I dreamed I was singing him a lullaby, and I woke up right when he gave his last breath. That's what they told me—the time he died, that's when I woke up, knowing he was gone and dead."

She pauses. "Do you think I helped him, helped his soul go to God, singing to him like that in my dream?"

"Yes," I say (it requires no thought), "I don't think it's impossible that you were an instrument of grace to him as he passed over."

"Good," she says to me, her face open and perfectly sincere, "because I feel I have a power, and that's to see the dying, and that my job—what I want to do—is give them comfort."

And I say: "That's a very important job."

There is a pause.

This is a natural conversation. Terrifying, of course, but as it should be. The world tips below us.

"Do you plan to leave this job," I ask her, "to maybe work with the sick?"

"No," she answers, adjusting her belt to get up and do cabin service. "For me, this job is about being closer to God—when I fly I feel that I am nearer to heaven."

She rises, preparing a tray of juice glasses in the galley to my right. Bending to open a low door she is near me: "Once, on a night flight, late, I asked God to show me a sign, a supernatural sign. And when I looked out the window I saw angels dancing around the moon, and they were so beautiful. And when I went to church the next day, the pastor—he was wearing the same robe as all those angels."

And with that, she offers me a juice, which I do not take (I am afraid), and she walks back into the cabin.



Now and again eternity drops like a sharp plumb bob through the tissue paper of a day, leaving a trembling line in our midst. And as the plane climbs higher, I feel this line vibrate in sympathy with the turboprops. The earth falls away into a sandy patchwork and the white noise suddenly grows warm and close as we hit a bank of clouds.

She returns to her upright seat, directly before me, rigid as a small throne. And she speaks.

“Sometimes I know I was meant to meet someone, and that I will meet them again. I can tell things about people. When I saw you I felt that we had talked before, and I feel that we will meet again.”

And I say (trying to be precise, aware that we are having several conversations at once): “You’re very fortunate to have these powers. You have to take care of them. They’re dangerous. Nobody has ever liked strong women with special powers—witches, saints. You have to be careful, or you’ll frighten people.”

She says nothing, in a friendly way.

“Who knows you feel these things?” I ask.

“My boyfriend knows. He used to say I was crazy, but then when I went to look at a new apartment with him—and the woman who was showing us around. . . I felt a peaceful spirit in the place. And I asked her, ‘did someone die in this place?’ and she told me that her sister had just died in the apartment—and then he believed.”

“And what about your parents? Your family?”

“No. They have closed minds. They don’t want to hear about it.”

Her name, she tells me, is Mohammed, “but you can call me Mo.”

She rises again and goes back to collect cups.

Despite her name, she is Christian, as is her family. She was adopted, and came to her new parents as a small girl already answering to this prophetic and alien appellation.

When she returns I ask her, quickly (for now I am aware that I want to keep her occupied in conversation, lest she get too creative):

“When did you discover that you had this gift?”

And she replies, looking at me fixedly: “When I was twelve, I stared at my cousin, and I didn’t know why I was staring at him, and the next day he died. That was when I knew.”

“Have you ever tried to talk to people once you knew these things? To warn them, or to give them comfort?”

“No—I just see their face like in a dream, only their face, nothing else—and then I know.”

Again she rises, to arrange things in the cabin. We will be beginning our descent before too long.

When she returns, I again speak first, quick out of the blocks (yes, talking with her, but also, to be sure, holding her at bay): “There is an old blues song in which the singer says that when it is time for him to die, all he wants his friends to do is ‘hold his body down.’ I like that. He wants his friends to hold his body down so that his spirit can get free of the body. By holding his body down, they will help him rise.”

“I like that,” she says, “that’s nice.”

And I continue (yes, saying things I want to say, but aware, too, that I am now playing Scheherazade—talking to hold death back, talking to keep her from offering me a meddling prophecy), and I say (yes, to set my powers against hers, to mark myself out as another prophet and thus not a subject of prophecy): “I have felt these kinds of things, too, but I do not feel them anymore. This sort of thing is not guaranteed to be permanent.”

“I wouldn’t want it to be permanent,” she replies, and then, more confidentially, she says, “I know, you know, that I will never be an old woman.”

I nod, silently.

“You have to be careful,” I say after a pause. “Pray for good judgment. Pray to use your powers well.”

And as the plane descends through the clouds I find myself telling her the story of Moses, which she says she does not know—the story of his fatal error when he spoke incautiously to the Israelites, suggesting that the powers he had displayed for them were

his own; his punishment, of course, was exclusion from the promised land to which he had led them. She listens—as I try either to help her or to keep her in her place.

And she says: “Some people think hell has fire and that fire is the punishment, but I think that hell is different. I believe that hell is a place where God puts those who have done less than what they could—less than they should—and so in that place He shows them what their life could have been like if they had done the things that God intended.”

“That would be a very serious punishment,” I reply, “to be forced to see, forever, how a life could have been perfect.”

“That is what I think.”

And we land.



Taxiing to the gate, we look together out the small porthole window that we share: a landscape of ribbed cement, illegible signs, vehicles moving purposefully, goggled men gesturing at giant silver forms.

After a moment of silence Mohammed says: “I also have a clothing line, because I’m very into fashion. It’s called ‘Do You,’ since it’s about Jesus, hip-hop, and being yourself.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, Do You.”

“Oh,” I say, suddenly getting it, “as in the command: *do* you.”

“Yes.”

And I open to the back of the book that is still open on my lap, and I make a note to myself on the flyleaf—not for the first time in this conversation.

Seeing this, she asks, “Are you taking notes on what I am saying?”

And I say that yes, I am, since I am interested in the things that she has to say and want to remember them.

“I make T-shirts with a picture of Jesus on them,” she says. “They’ve got ‘J.C. left a message for you’ on them.”



When we get off the plane she reaches for my hand, and asks me my name, and I give it, and I tell her that I will pray for her and that I hope she will do the same for me. And then later, in the depths of O'Hare, at another gate, as I stand in line to buy a bottle of water, I do indeed see her again, and start to wave, but when she looks likely to pass by without remarking me, I think better of it. On she walks, drawing her small rolling case down the great glass hall.

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