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Everything Lies Flat

Juliet's father was flying the plane, and I knew he had some issues, because once he cornered me in their kitchen and argued with me for an hour about the state of Israel while his wife and daughter stood silently on the stairs. Juliet's father handed us headsets in the plane. Juliet's mother and dog got in the other seat up front, the dog's white fur brushing the plane controls.

Flight MH370 disappeared somewhere over the Indian Ocean when I was 12 years old. I guess the theory everyone agreed upon was that the pilot crashed it on purpose. Ever since then, every time I get on a plane, I greet the pilot in a voice a few octaves above my regular one. I don't know where I got the idea that being cute would save us all from a mass murder-suicide. It feels important to stare at the pilot, though, to make him know I'm watching for an eye twitch that seems unhinged.

If a pilot seemed unhinged, would I get off the plane? Or would I sit silently and wait?

My friend Juliet from summer camp had a private plane, and I was not allowed on it by my parents. We all knew it, but that wasn't going to stop my friend, her mother in leather pants, her father in the pilot's seat. I was going with them in the plane, a day trip to the Hamptons. My parents would never know, they said. I followed along to the tarmac with the hot young traffic controller, a bag of sugary granola in my hands. I told them if we crashed, I wanted the last taste in my mouth to be sweet. They laughed.

The voices piped in through the plane headsets were Persian Jews, Juliet's father said. Different from Juliet's family, from whatever type of Jew I was. Persian Jews all had huge mansions on the water, like mafia palaces. They were gauche, he said. Their planes were big, their piloting licenses bare-bones, he said. Their voices were muddled through the speakers. When Juliet's father mocked the Persians, we'd miss what the traffic controllers' directions were, and we would have to phone in and ask for them to repeat it. We stayed on the tarmac for an hour, listening to a constant stream of voices asking to be let free.

The take-off was mechanical, automatic. Juliet's father sat there, barely touching the controls. The dog squirmed in Juliet's mother's arms. Once we were up in the air, Juliet's father went limp. Silent, eyes closed. Dead. Just lying there. The controls flashed and I looked at Juliet. She was reading a magazine.

In May 2018, a Boeing employee sent an email about the cover-ups involving the safety of Boeing 737 Max aircrafts. Many passengers had already died, entire planes in flames. The email: "I still haven't been forgiven by God for the covering up I did last year. Can't do it one more time...the pearly gates will be closed...."

I opened my bag of granola and started picking out the dried fruit, prepping my throat for a sweet end. We stayed like that for a bit, silent, motionless, suspended in air. I imagined a hand holding the plane. Like we were a toy. I imagined this hand dropping. I imagined this hand lifting me up. I started digging through the granola rapidly, ravenously.

He was just joking. He was just joshing with us, he said. He was alive. He could fly the plane, he was fine, totally fine, he said. He pet the whining dog beside him, its eyes crusty with bacteria. *I wasn't sleeping*, he said. He was resting his eyes, he was refueling. He was up now. We all were up.

Juliet's father turned the plane so we could look at the huge houses in the peninsulas of the Hamptons, houses you could only reach by plane. The houses bubbled up on thin strips of green, locked in between large squares of tennis courts and pools. I felt like I was viewing something secret, something I wasn't supposed to know about.

The pilot of flight MH370 turned the plane so he could back look at his hometown. He knew that it was for the last time. No one else did. No one else on the flight was conscious, knocked out due to severe depressurization—he was the only one able to look. What he saw was blue and green, probably. It was clear, probably. I wonder how much he could see, if he was too high up to see buildings, could only make out the outlines of the coast.

I held Juliet's hand the whole plane ride, tight, and I was worried she would think I was gay for it. A lot of what I did around Juliet seemed gay. The leather loafers, for one. The button-up shirts. The fact that every boy I pointed out as cute looked strangely, intensely female. The fact that, when we went to a New Year's party, a girl zeroed in on me for a kiss and I didn't pull away automatically. I said that the alcohol had stunted my response time, and Juliet still let me sleep in the same bed, deeming me free from blame. I was good at coming up with reasons to avoid the blow-up air mattress.

When we started circling the ground, Juliet's father told us all to shut up. This part was the only one that wasn't automatic. Juliet's mother pressed the dog to her chest. I pressed Juliet's fingernails into my palms, made tiny circles on her hand with my nails. The plane dipped, swerved. I imagined the hand holding us up, I imagined the hand with a tremor. I imagined the hand at rest. We circled towards the ground. No, we were shoved into the ground by the sky. Juliet's father said *Shit*. Juliet's father said *Not my best work*. Juliet's mother said *We're down now, aren't we?*

A private plane belonging to Jeffery Epstein was found rusting at an airport in Georgia. Juliet's father had been invited on this plane, once, at a party in Palm Beach. He declined. But what if he hadn't? He would've seen that everything in Epstein's plane lies flat to become a bed. Even the floors—they're padded. There's room for twenty-nine passengers, which is twenty-five more than Juliet's plane. The couches are bright red velour. The windows are tinted, as if anyone would be looking in from the sky. As if the passengers had to hide from a clown on the wing, an angel, a flock of geese.

In the Hamptons, the plane we came in looked so small compared to the others lined up. To exit, you had to step on the wing. When I looked back, I saw a small puddle of oil underneath the belly of the plane. All the other planes were dry underneath. I said nothing.

The Epstein plane's black book revealed more names of suspected co-conspirators than anything else. *New York Magazine* did a whole issue titled The Black Book. It was name after name after name. After riding in Juliet's plane, I was scared that she had a black book, too. If there was a record of me in the air, in that machine, I wanted to find it and destroy it. I felt vaguely wrong, like I had been trapped, or had done something against my will, even though I had willingly stepped into that plane. On top of that wing. I wonder who flew the Epstein plane to Georgia. I wonder how they got back home.

The Hamptons jitney is a bus that takes you there from the city. Beachgoers, rich ones, stand in line for the bus. No, you can't call it the bus, or they would get mad. It is the jitney, strictly the jitney. I stared at the jitney-riders with disdain. Time was flexible for me now, I saw secret islands and beaches and houses that they couldn't. I could leave any time I wanted. Except—I couldn't. Except—I would never go back to the Hamptons, because the jitney was expensive.

Juliet visited me where I live, in Appalachia. She came in the plane, piloted, again, by her father. The dog didn't come this time. The plane was too small to sail over the mountains, and so they went up and down each individual one. I loved that. She had scaled the Appalachian mountains in order to visit me. Yes, I loved that she had gone on an odyssey for me, tracing the ranges. It was a four hour car ride; she made it to me in an hour.

Juliet had me pick her up at the private wing of the airport, and I got lost on the way there; I didn't know such a thing existed. The entire airport itself was one-story, much smaller than the Wal-Mart a few roads down. The private wing looked like the DMV, but it had a popcorn machine and hot cookies. I felt like I was seeing something I wasn't meant to see. The Hamptons private islands had turned into rotating hot dog racks, and they still seemed so gorgeous, and rare, only revealed to me in flashes.

My Grandpa Stanley had a plane, apparently, before he went to prison. It sounds very dramatic, but it wasn't—he was a criminal defense lawyer, he got too close with one of his clients who had escaped the law, and then he was in jail. The family went from a good lawyer's salary to none, and so the plane was sold. I never met Grandpa Stanley, or the plane—this is all before my time. When I think of a criminally left-behind plane, I think of his.

Is his plane rusting in Georgia? Did he fall asleep at the pilot's controls? Would he have flown me somewhere? Would he have had that MH370 twitch in his eye? Would I have sat silently and gone with him anyway? Yes, yes. Yes.

My uncle trained to be a pilot, then stopped to take some photos for lingerie brands (and, once, pictures of Miranda Cosgrove twirling pearls around her feet) and then got too old to become a pilot for any real airline. Too old is thirty-five. He's now a customer service operator for a camera store. And him, would I let him fly me? Would I sit silently and hope he woke up?

After my grandfather Stanley died, my grandmother took up with her high school sweetheart, Victor. We all knew Victor would not reach the pearly gates. Victor ate sticks of butter like bananas, and had a bullet wound in his face. Victor said he had been a jeweler, then moved to Mexico to sell bibles with a druggie girlfriend, then was scouted by the Russian government to spy on the United States but refused. Victor and my grandmother threw canned goods at each other in a supermarket and were kicked out. The only respectable thing Victor did was make very intricate model planes, shiny ones that could really fly on miniature runways.

When Victor died, we cleaned out his apartment, and found his model planes hanging from the ceiling. When no one was looking, I put my hands on the underbellies of the planes. I imagined myself inside, a dog in the front seat, a fake-sleeping pilot. I held the underbelly and I felt it. I held the underbelly and I let my hand down and the plane was still hanging from the ceiling, yes, it would not fall.

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