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When Grammy winners give speeches, or footballers score touchdowns, they point upward, as if paying homage to someone or someplace holy. But if they knew what I know about upward, they'd know that heaven couldn't be in that direction; that a passenger beat his lad so hard, two shades of blood, his and the toddler's, smeared an abstract of abuse on the lavatory mirror—a ravine of Hail Marys clotted in the sink. And they'd remember that woman who checked carry-ons with her baby packed inside; infant screams stabbed through a 737 floorboard—a makeshift morgue because a mother was tired of baggage.

As a flight attendant, I walk within a jurisdiction of wide powdered blue horizons, puffy as croissants, and the axis hollowed in my navel. But I have also seen, in that deep romantic openness, criminals fooled into thinking that this place, where angels exhale, is the perfect escape. They forget, that even above clouds, someone is always watching.

We prepare for the Aruba redeye. Fog of a dirty martini haze tucks Houston's silhouette into the moon. In the dimmed back galley, I take liquor inventory. Wafts of fresh scone from the nearby bakery pirouette through aircraft doors deliberately cracked. The pilots do pre-flight checks with the cockpit open. Rows of navigation buttons glow beneath the windshield, an aquarium of controls. In double-breasted "hellos," shellac manicures, and bleached smiles, we welcome two hundred passengers. Threading the aisles for their seats, they move unusually slowly, like an aged jeweler stranding black pearls. Gentle as a drunken Casanova.

At mid-cabin, the most junior attendant, Sonya, briefs the emergency exit row. Her words connect into a southern nursery rhyme, "In the 'vent oven-ah-mergency, will y'all be willin' and able tah open these windahs and evacuate?" Spanning his newspaper wide as a drape, an aisle seated man reads, disregarding Sonya. None of them ask the details like where are the mooring lines, or the blades to cut them. None of them ask where to go if all exits explode. There's an arrogant presumption that life will bow in their favor, the very section most likely to detonate. But in unison, they all squawk, "Yes."

I scan the crowd, knowingly. A seated congregation, where sinners are no more obvious than salt in sand dunes. Ten minutes until departure, the customer agent takes a final passenger tally. A shaven, silver-haired man, enters. Concealing his ethnicity, a faint suntan compliments his suit. It's hued ginger, clutching his frame like linen origami on a paper doll. A plush leather duffle dangles from his shoulder. The designer's emblem, two interlocked Cs, sits between brass hammerheads glimmering from the bottom.

He pulls slightly behind him a little girl, about eight years old. She limps. Her thin T-shirt, the texture of onionskin, is grey and ripped down the side. Rungs of ribs protrude the tear. Her cheeks are deeply shoveled. A bobbed wig, the color of ripe plums, veils her periphery. She's empty handed. No coloring book. No electronic game.

In first class, he positions her into 4B, the way a mortician poses a body. He snaps his finger, dropping the duffle at Sonya's feet. "Bag," he orders. As she lifts it into the bin, her scarf peels backward, loose as petals blooming from her collar. Satisfied, The Man sits into a sinkhole of himself, clasping the girl's hand into his lap.

Warmed engines rumble, blasting birds off like cannon balls. I put my cellphone in airplane mode and shove it in the crew stowage compartment. The plane pushes timidly from the gate. Fuel fumes cradle waves of espresso dripping from the coffee machine. I buckle into my harness. Its khaki straps cross me like arms of a starfish. I lean into the porthole, and watch the city fall.

Sonya and I push the service cart up the steep incline. At row four, The Man snores, open-mouthed. A blend of clove cigar and frankincense rise from his tongue. The girl plays Rock Paper Scissors by herself. She's bitten her fingernails to the skin.

"Want something to drink, Sug?" I purr into the question.

Pretending to ignore me, she puts her chin to her chest. Her eyelashes flicker as if she is interested, but weighed down. Still asleep, The Man's solid arm smothers her thigh, locking her weakness into place. She tightens her rock, but either way she plays, she loses.



The Man startles awake, flailing. He sees the service cart, "No soda for girl!" then jabs his index into my side. "Mineral wau-dah. No ice"—a message, not a request. I lean into the cart feeling his eyes pat down my body, vulgar like a hanger abortion. He cracks the can, hisses with it, and drinks without sharing. Slamming the empty can back on the cart, it stalls in his impetus. Through veneers glossy as an alcoholic's gaze, he mutters, "We fly to grandparent. Child, mine. Passports, in bag." An unsolicited alibi.

"That's fine, sir. I just wanted to know if your daughter was thirsty, that's all," I pause purposefully, between every word.

The plane belches forward, flaring merlot from cups. Call lights ring like panic bells. Wind spears the cabin, whistling along the fuselage. The oxygen masks don't drop. Fear swells hot as a sauna, passengers blistering with anxiety. Sonya buckles onto the cart and falls. From his seat, an air marshal, disguised in a baseball cap, extends his reach. But from the floor, she's heavy as groceries.

I press the cart's break pedal with my foot and look back for the girl. I finally see her hazel eyes, rimmed bloodshot, like a browned wreath twined in red garland. Her pupils spring down then bounce up, simulating Tetris on the bulkhead. Her breath is pickled in whiskey.

Ding! The seatbelt sign.

"Ladies and gen-ul-men, this y'Captain. I'm gon have the flyd-tennants discontin-yah service til' we find smooth air. Make sure those seatbelts-er fas-end," he speaks smothered and low, dense like gravy.

Sonya and I rush the cart to the galley and latch it. "Something isn't right about that guy in 4C. Did you see the way he touches the kid?"

"Yeah, a real charmer, that one," Sonya smirks. "Hell, the creep wouldn't let ya get two words in to her." Lurching into the aisle, I see the little girl forge toward me. The plane thrusts right, erupting into aeronautical potholes. She collapses into my catch. Iron-shaped welts line her skinny biceps, resembling swollen canoes rippling under her veins. Her body, a list of crimes.

"Please help me, that's, not, not my dad," she keeps watch over her shoulder, a child biding time. "If he sees me back here..." she places her head into the bowl of her fingers, as if offering herself for sacrifice.

"Stay back here with us," I say, helping her onto the jump seat. Sonya offers her a twelve-ounce can of orange juice. In five gulps, it's empty. I soak paper towels in melted ice, pressing them in the crevice of her elbows, at her clavicle. I peel the wig from her scalp. She flattens my wrist against her forehead, trying to keep the rest of her secrets from slipping. But it's too late. The edges come undone. Glue rips away from her hairline, dried in sores. She is a boy. His natural blonde hair, sheared.

"My name's Brandon. I live in Indiana." He taps the bottom of the orange juice can into his mouth, funneling droplets. I taste violations in his odor, sour grapefruits after buttermilk, spoiled, engraved into his flesh like a brand. He'd been abducted during recess then sold.

Forced to wear mini-skirts and lipstick, Brandon ate once a day, the scraps of captors' dinners—men, and women, who paid to rape children. Traded and sodomized daily, his hourly rate was \$400.00 and always taken by The Man. He slept in his shoes; the ones he had on when he was abducted.

"That guy, his name is Isaac. Everyday, he gives me morning brew and drops me off at motels. I've been to Phoenix, L.A., and Chicago, even Mexico. Grownups come to the motel and, and," his sobs break, like seashells against a breached dam.

I mourn him in his presence, a prodigal minister of his own torture, and ponder what life could linger with all of his pieces savagely broken. "Brandon, honey, you said 'morning brew.' What is that?"

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"Alcohol mixed in energy drink. Helps me not be scared. Isaac said I have to drink it so I can work without crying or missing my mom. I got two sisters, Meghan and Jenna. And a puppy. Isaac said mom sold me to him. But one time, when Isaac left me in the car, I heard my dad on the radio, begging me home. They're looking for me, ma'am."

He speaks with prophetic patience about darkness more vintage than his years. His voice, still soprano, floats unevenly outward like butterflies. I yank the interphone from the wall and call the cockpit. "This Doug. How y'gals doin?" He chuckles.

"Doug, we need you to make an emergency landing. It's urgent. Alert the terminal. We've got a boy back here being trafficked to Aruba. Missing for three months..."

"Wait, what? How y'all know all this?"

"He's right here. Boarded in Houston. We cannot let him get off the plane with this man."

"Oh my god. Listen, I can't just bring planes down. There's gotta be direct and terroristic threat tah the aircraft. Honey, they won't let me jus-lan-cuz-yah think somethin'. I fly 'em from point A to point B and wish 'em well. This' a liability the airline dudn't need."

Before Doug finishes, the thick velvet curtain behind first class slashes down the middle. The Man charges into coach, heading aft. He knocks cups off tray tables, kicks luggage out of his path, yelling expletives in three languages. He rips up seat-bottom cushions, pops open overhead bins, looking for Brandon. Terroristic threat.

I grab my cell out of the stowage compartment, "Go in the lay, sweetie." Brandon opens the door and we scurry in. I latch it. My uniform shirt wets. Looking down, a procession of Brandon's tears settle at the hem of my blouse. "Ma'am, he has a folding knife hidden in his jacket."

"You won't leave with him Brandon, I promise." We huddle on the lidded commode. I rock him calmly, though my pulse pumps rapid as sirens. Pleading God for an unlikely signal, I turn on my cellphone. "Just hold on, beloved. Hold on."

"Sir! You need to have a seat. Now. Now!" Sonya hollers. The Man's fists dent the door like tribal drums warning danger. Brandon covers his ears from metal screeching. The top right corner bends inward, easy as an earmarked page. Through the gash, a movie of his memories replays—a kaleidoscope of felonies in linen suits, designer bags holding children against their will, and falsified passports of morning-brewed boys locked in rooms only accessible by motel stairs. Suddenly, The Man's rage stops.

"Federal Air Marshall! Move again, and I will shoot!" I hear the ball-capped marshal order The Man to kneel. Pistol chrome plugs The Man's temple. Then, like a chance of air after minutes underwater, my phone catches a signal, "National Trafficking Hotline, how may I direct your call?"

With my sleeve, I dab the residue of Brandon's tears. He stands on the toilet, squinting through the hole in the door, as The Man is handcuffed.

"This is crew 7-7-8-3, JourSouth Airlines. We're about 20,000 feet from final descent, but we have a trafficked child in custody. Please, as soon as we land, we'll need customs, ICE, FBI, police, everyone. We need everyone." TBJ



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