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Flight Delay

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Flight Delay

*In the room the women come and go
talking of Michelangelo*

I never met Brooke's Hollywood boyfriend. He went out West after college, landed a tech job with *Silk Stalkings*. He shared a two-room hellhole with a dancer named Dino—they both hoped to score with a film on the night club scene. Brooke and me were all set to see *Casablanca* in Columbus—the midway point between our two colleges—but the boyfriend squelched the plan. He felt threatened. You can imagine my surprise when I found myself driving to the Port of Columbus to pick his sorry self up.

Brooke didn't have a car, and as a favor I drove the three hours down to OU and the two hours back up to Columbus so that she and the Hollywood boyfriend could have a tearful reunion. He felt threatened.

Jesus. Brooke and I had only been friends for years. We went to high school together. We did the spring musicals together. She was my best friend, so what if she was a girl? I remember how she caught my eye. It was winter. Snow in the school parking lot was shoveled into three-foot high banks. We all tossed around snowballs when we weren't sliding on the ice and breaking our backs. Only getting caught with the snowballs resulted in a swift sending to the Dean's office. I was in the hall when Mr. Guttman brought in the latest batch of public offenders. Brooke was among them. The three or four other kids walked with lowered heads, scuffed the heels of their shoes on the wet floor tiles. Brooke didn't. She kept her head up. She smiled and waved at me. It was some sort of French Resistance thing. I knew I had to know this girl.

"You'll like him," she said as we drove to the airport. "I'm positive."

"He's your boyfriend." I turned up the radio, *That's Life*, the Chairmen a'crooning. I lost myself in the lyrics. I didn't want to be sore with her. But that's how I am. I'm an old type with old sensibilities. My tastes and values are the stuff of memory. I can't help who I am.

"So tired." She yawned and rubbed away the green shadow around her eyes. "Robert kept me up till four last night. He's been so depressed lately. He lost out on the Addams Family movie."

"Tragic." I turned onto 670, kept my eyes on the road and my ears on the radio. "A poet, a pauper, a pawn, and a king."

"Still into that stuff?" Brooke and me, although best of friends, differed in our musical tastes. Her big thing was playing Jonathan Richman songs on her accordion. She gave free performances at the Swivel Fish, the bar where she met Mr. Hollywood. The first time he, then a senior, saw her, then a freshman, she was singing an original work, "Would You Still Love Me if I were Just a Head?"

"Always," I told her. "My music never goes out of fashion. Just like the clothes."

She smiled. "You know Jason Cook thought you were a fag. The way you dressed. He said you and Perry were butt buddies."

"Charming. Don't remember the kid." And I didn't, though the insult seemed familiar. There was nothing fruity about the way I dressed. It was different, and to the

pea-brained, anything different is queer. It was stylish. Brooke and me went to Catholic high school, which meant ties and dress pants and button-down shirts. My grandpa died my sophomore year and did the strangest thing—he willed me his clothes. Closets full of clothes. Suits and hats and ties which hadn't seen the light of day since the Truman administration. I ate them up. I wore them instead of the lame uniform standards. I wear them now in college. You can't beat a classic.

I tore the ticket out from the dispenser and pulled into the parking lot. Brooke didn't look bad herself. She wore a plush brown hat and a green velvet dress. Think woodland nymph meets MTV v-jay. She had style. In high school, when her hair was its natural color, she wore the standard blouse and brown skirt. She didn't have the five rings in each ear and the green lipstick. She looked crazed, and kids kept their distance. She freaked them out with all the cat scratches on her arms. She had style that afternoon. She had to, for the boyfriend.

He was staying for a week. She had just signed the lease on a small apartment in Athens. She was going to stay there over break. They planned to take in old haunts.

"We picked out a china pattern last night," she said on the escalator.

"That's a bit presumptuous." I tipped my homburg at a girl going in the opposite direction. She looked positively bewildered.

"Not really picked it out." Brooke ran her fingers along the railing. He was her first boyfriend, and they were serious. "We weren't shopping or anything. My grandma called. Her neighbor left her all these plates and things. We're convinced the woman's a paranoid schizophrenic. She had only been living next to my grandma for a couple of months. She thought the neighbors were out to get her and just left."

"Without her china."

"That's right."

"Just make sure the set has a butter dish. The butter dish makes the set."

She laughed and threw an arm around my waist. I gave her a tight, little hug as we descended into the concourse. His flight was American Airways. We checked one of three Arrival monitors that just seemed to float in the vast amount of space. She looked at her wrist, "Flight 237."

"From LA?"

"From Denver. He has a stopover in Denver, and then here." She squinted at the black marks on her wrist, the numbers slightly blurred. Her skin looked moist. Could she actually have been nervous? "It's got to be that, 237," she said.

"Hate to tell you this, darling, but that flight's been delayed."

And so it had. In Denver.

She charged the American Airways tickets and information center. She demanded information on the flight. I felt sorry for the guy behind the counter, this guy with a comb over and acne scars. But he had the softest, smoothest voice. He sounded like Mel Torme.

"Let me check that one." The American Airways man tapped a couple of keys on the keyboard, dialed his desk phone, tapped the blue counter-top, and attempted to smile. "Just a minute."

She rolled her eyes. We looked at the gate leading into the terminal. It was closed. A large, aluminum grate blocked the way.

The man set down the receiver. "I'm so sorry. We're looking at about a two-hour delay on that flight. There's a bad storm in Denver. They're not letting anyone up."

"Two hours?" She gripped the edge of the counter-top and leaned half way across. "You're telling me, it's been delayed for two hours."

"Come back in an hour. Maybe I'll have something more promising to tell you." He looked at me, "Nice tie." He looked over our shoulder at a gentleman holding a kitten and wearing bermuda shorts, and we knew our time was up and drifted to the back of the line.

"What can we do for two hours?" She dragged her boots across the gray tiles.

"Buy a magazine. Drink some coffee." I was up for a trip to the cigar shop but didn't think Brooke would go for it. She didn't smoke then, and she didn't smoke now. Though I told her you can't beat a clove cigarette on a winter day.

"There's a Max and Erma's." She rubbed the green belly of her dress. "I skipped breakfast this morning."

"You're saying you could go for lunch."

She smiled. So we went.

I ordered the Rueben grill and a cup of coffee. The airport Max and Erma's wasn't like the real thing, even though it had a patio with round tables and metal chairs placed on Astroturf. The menu was smaller and the service was slower. Thankfully, the prices weren't higher. Brooke ordered onion rings. After taking a bite of one, she held her hand out to me.

"Look at the pinkie. You see that?"

I saw a red gash, about an inch in length, above the silver eye ring she kept on that finger.

"That's where the bird bit me."

"Bird?"

"The one that flew into my room."

"Into your room?"

"Birds are omens of something?"

I set down my Rueben. "Hold on a second," I said. "You're saying a bird flew into your room. Just came right in. What type of bird?"

"I don't know. A black one. And I wasn't there when it dropped in. I just came back to the room and heard this fluttering noise coming from behind my chair."

"Was it injured?"

"No."

"How did it bite you?"

"I wrapped it up in a sheet and took it over to the window. You should have heard it squawk. I opened the sheet to look at it, and it just turned its head and bit me."

She laughed. She was always hurting herself in the strangest ways. In high school she once slipped in the hall and sliced her head on the sharp corner of a locker. She needed stitches, and hides the scar with her hair. The cat scratches are gone too. She used to torture her cat, put it in the washer, drop it from her bunk bed to see if cats really do land on all fours—that type of sick stuff—so it was no wonder the beast carved her up any chance it got. And then there was the one time I visited her at OU. I drove down one

weekend, and she introduced me to her latest hobby—climbing onto the roofs of public buildings. She and her friends did it all the time—movie theaters, restaurants, apartments. She even climbed to the top of the Methodist church. It was the fun thing, the challenging thing to do. We climbed to the roof of the Drake and sat on the ledge. She brought along her accordion. It was a warm autumn night, quiet in the weeks before Halloween madness. I pointed out the constellations I knew from two years as a boy scout. Cassiopeia—the house. Orion—the hunter. Cygnus—the swan. She played her accordion—*That's Amore*. She stood on the ledge, pranced around, played the accordion. And then I thought she slipped, and I had her by the wrist. But my grip was stronger than I thought. I bruised her wrist.

“Robert when he heard that—we’re talking total basket-case. He’s very protective.” She bit into an onion ring and sipped her soda. “It was only a little birdie. A Tweetie bird. Well, a black Tweetie bird. Nothing to lose sleep over.”

The boyfriend was always losing sleep, or depressed. Paranoid. Everytime I called her, she’d be on the phone with him. She was always like, “I’ve got Robert on hold. Can you call back?” Then I would, and she would complain to me about her phone bill. They talked every day. She paid. He was struggling, you know. She could make the sacrifice. Then I’d hear a beep-beep, and she’d put me on hold. Then she was like, “It’s Robert again. He’s being an ass. I’ve got to go.” She always went.

He never let her have a life of her own, her first boyfriend. She received a bad evaluation on her design project, had a rough day at work, and they still spent all their time talking about him. His money problems. His career problems. His sexual frustrations. She never got a word in edge-wise she told me. And the one time Brooke and I were supposed to meet, after almost a year apart, he squelched it. He didn’t feel comfortable with the three of us going to see a lousy movie. He felt threatened. Even though she told him what friends we were. But, hey, I had the parties.

The parties gave me perspective. The things you’re mocked for in high school make you popular in college. Everybody flocks to the weirdoes. My clothes. My music. My cigars. They lapped it up. Before I knew it, I had a group of boys in suits following me around, learning the subtly of showing cuff and how to mix a proper manhattan. I hosted parties every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday—filled my double with smoke, booze, and dancing bodies. Some kid said I looked like Orson Welles. I dug it. Better than being fat or fruity.

“Think we should talk to that guy again?” She ran a finger across the grease on her plate and licked it clean. “Think the storm let up?”

“I don’t think things are more promising.” I pointed at the booth across from ours. And there was our buddy, the American Airways guy, tossing back a Heineken.

We strolled through the Bath and Body Works across from Max and Erma’s—the malling of America is a verifiable truth, I’m certain of this. Amid all the Raspberry Swirl body wash and baby blue sponges—the thick blend of mango, sea breeze, and pine—I thought of the girls I encounter these days. They all smell of vanilla or CK-1. I couldn’t remember what Brooke smelled like. She didn’t have a smell. She was just Brooke.

She picked up a container of honey-flavored lip balm. “I should get something for Robert. He’ll be all scummy after his flight. He told me he buys the type of soap I use

so he can smell like me, be reminded of me. Isn't that nuts?"

I nodded.

"He's always doing stuff like that. Sweet, weird romantic things. I told you about the book?"

I picked up a bottle of Peaches and Cream perfume and sprayed her with it.

"Stop," she pushed the bottle away. "I'm saying, we have this book we send back and forth between us. It's just a notebook, but I've added lots of cool stuff to the cover. Like this picture of Lou Reed with this quote where he talks about true love. But the book we use to write down the things we can't say on the phone. It was his idea."

"Remember Neff." I re-arranged the various fragrance bottles on a shelf. "He sure could have used a place like this."

"That's not nice." She set down the lip balm. "People were always picking on him."

Which was true. One time during *Fiddler on the Roof*, with Brooke and Neff in the orchestra and myself playing Tevye, I saw what she meant. I was standing behind the curtain, clicking my fingers, waiting for my cue, sweat dripping onto my microphone and crackling. It was the third show, and I could barely talk—I spooned honey down my throat between numbers. And there was Walter Neff, playing violin, the best violinist in the school and the kid with the worst hygiene—bad breath, body odor, greasy hair. During rallies, a space was cleared for him on the bleachers, and people only approached him to book him or to point fingers and laugh. There he was, all set to play, only he couldn't find the bow. He searched all around his seat, but couldn't find it. I saw it, his bow. It was being passed along, row after row, the whole orchestra in on the prank. It reached Brooke. She stood up and walked two rows over to return it to a sweating, stammering Neff. I went on to do my number. "Kids are cruel," I told her. "That's why I'm ripping up any invites to reunions."

Brooke smiled. "Two years. Two years, and I'm out of Ohio."

I forced her to sit with me through a cigar. We saw the kitten guy again. He walked past us twice, the kitten resting on his shoulder. He patted it the way one patted a child. And then there was this older couple, both in sunglasses, who had to pass us at least four times. I could swear the woman said, "Must be easy," the first time they passed. They kept lapping the airport. The worst sight was this cleaning guy with a broom and dustpan. He'd brush a patch of sidewalk clear and be back in five minutes to do it again. "So sad," Brooke said. She rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands.

"It's a quarter to three, there's no one in the place." I danced around, dropped ash on the concrete.

"Singing again?" She sighed and looked at the blurred numbers on the back of her wrist. She pulled her hat over her eyes. "Two hours."

"Except you and me." I saw some birds, mostly sea gulls. They ate scraps of gum and popcorn, right off the concrete. I didn't see any black birds, so I couldn't ask her, "Was that the one that bit you?"

She straightened out her dress and went inside.

I watched her through the glass doors, talking to the man behind the American Airways counter. Her green dress fit her well. I never saw her in a dress before this

afternoon. We were at this dance our freshman year of high school, a sock hop, imagine that, held in the gym, and she wore jeans and a tank top. There was a contest at the dance. Whoever wore the most creative pair of socks won two tickets to miniature golf. I wore socks with pins stuck in them—political buttons, “We want Wilkie,” and the like—which only cemented the popular opinion of me being a weirdo. I asked her to dance at least three times that evening. I was a romantic, as earnest as the oldest chevalier. She refused, hid beneath the bleachers. No one danced with me. I grew tired and went out into the hall for a drink of water. As I was bending down by the fountain, I got struck in the back of the skull, my forehead slamming into the porcelain. I fell down, expecting to turn around and see Jesse Clark, the wrestling captain, or some comparable Neanderthal looming above me. I saw Brooke. She was biting her nails and laughing. She smiled and helped me up. I laughed—because it was such a damn strange situation. She was so damn strange. We laughed it off together.

“Right on time,” she said when I met her inside. She was right. The Arrival monitor said Flight 237 was due in at the proper time. She didn’t bother going back to information and tickets. She went right to the gate, A-15. It took me forever to get past security. Silver cigarette case. Flask. My rings. My watch. Tie clip. Cuff links. I was the frigging Tin Man.

Brooke zipped through, despite several piercings, and pressed herself against the observation glass. She stood on the sill. “Right on time,” she said.

I looked at all the people in the bucket seats. Men in suits. Men in polo shirts. Women in suits. Women with children. “They’re looking at you, you know, staring.”

“Robert and I haven’t seen each other in months. They can cut us some slack.”

“Cut us some slack.” I stuck my hand in my coat pocket for a second cigar, remembered my surroundings, and let it drop. “You know, you never told me why you asked me to do this. You could have gotten one of your OU buddies. They drive, don’t they?”

She turned around. “I wanted to see you again. You’re my pally boy. You two should meet.”

“You know the last time I saw you standing like that was on the roof of the Drake.”

“I remember.”

“You were playing your accordion.”

“You were naming the stars.”

“And I thought you slipped. I grabbed you by the wrist.” I grabbed mine, turning the flesh red then white. “I always felt bad about that. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

But she didn’t hear me. She was pressed against the glass. Flight 237 out of Denver had landed.

—Paul Durica '00