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## Mother's Words

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## Mother's Words

Charlie felt his mother's fingertips fall from his shoulder and he walked down the portable orange hallway to the plane. "Don't forget to call me, Charlie," she said. He turned and waved, and she smiled, her face pink from giving into the tears she had promised herself she wouldn't cry.

On the way to the airport she told him to call as soon as he got to his father's apartment. In the line checking his suitcase she again reminded him to call, "but call from the airport, collect. I know your father, Charlie. He'll whisk you off to every California hot spot the minute you step off that plane, not even thinking of me, sitting back here in Cincinnati worrying about your safety." Now she stood right next to the gate attendant, in the pathway of the other boarding passengers, watching her son's back walk away from her. He turned once more and she waved a snotty kleenex and mouthed silently to him. "Call," her mouth said. Charlie smiled and stepped on the plane.

His assigned seat number was 12A, a window seat. He ducked in and sat down. Charlie watched as other passengers filed by, stopping every now and then, dodging from the over head compartments, checking their passes, and then moving forward again. He lifted the shade and looked out to the runway where squat blue men in headphones drove luggage carts between the wheels of the aircraft. His side of the plane faced the tinted windows of the terminal, behind which he knew his mother was still standing, counting back twelve of the plane windows in search of Charlie's face.

A middle-aged woman took the seat next to him. She wore a purple suit with large black buttons. She sat and set her black purse on her lap. She opened it and pulled out a white linen handkerchief which she placed behind her head, over the top of the chair. Charlie watched her and then turned to look at the bottom of his tray table on the seat in front of him.

"You never know who sat here before you," the woman said.

"Excuse me?"

"I said, you never know who sat here before you. That's why I always bring my hankie." She wore red lipstick on her lips and some smudged on her front left tooth.

Charlie looked back at the tray table and nodded once.

"They never change these covers, you know. I'd hate to catch some form of dreadful head lice from a stranger." Then she, too, turned to face the tray table in front of her.

When everyone was seated the stewardess checked seatbelts and the captain announced the time, apologizing for the delay in taking off.

Charlie looked once more at the tinted windows and silently bid his mother goodbye one last time, promising to call.

The plane sped down the runway and lifted off the ground. Charlie lay back in his seat, his body pressed into its curves at the neck and waist. Next to him the woman in purple gripped the arms of the chair. Charlie looked at her, and noticed that she kept her head forward, away from the back of the seat.

Cincinnati became a land of children's toy blocks below him, and the plane was soon above them. Charlie closed his eyes and heard the tone of the smoking and seatbelt signs go off.

"Are you coming or going?" Charlie felt the woman's hand on his arm and thought of his mother, clinging to him for as long as she could before he left her.

"I'm sorry?"

"Are you from Chicago?"

"No, Cincinnati." His throat was dry.

The woman in purple nodded her head. "So you're going." She was quiet for a moment as she lifted the handkerchief and then replaced it again. "I'm from Chicago. I had an hour layover in Cincinnati. It's a nice town."

Charlie didn't know if she was judging the city by one hour spent in the airport, nor did he care. As if reading his thoughts she continued, "I have only been to Cincinnati via the airport, but it seems nice enough."

She no longer looked at him when she spoke. He watched her hands. They were white, almost translucent, and he could see light green veins beneath her fair skin.

The flight was short and calm, but the woman held tight to the arm rests the entire time they were in the air. When they landed she turned to Charlie again. "In case you didn't notice," she said, "I hate to fly. You were a nice person to sit next to. Thank you." She unbuckled her seat belt and eased herself into the aisle, and waited for the line to move forward and deboard the plane.

Charlie waited until the plane was almost empty and then got off. He had an hour and a half in Chicago before his connecting flight to San Diego. He walked slowly to his gate, looking at the people. His aunt always talked about how the airport was a perfect place to get a glimpse of society in one of its more rare forms. People were either nervously awaiting their flight, excited about an arrival, or panicked about being late. There were very few people that were completely relaxed. Perhaps that was why they were in the airport, thought Charlie. They all needed to get away.

Across from his gate was a small newsstand and a pizza shop with a green awning that hung out into the airport hallway. 'Antony's' was written in yellow and red across the front. Charlie went inside and ordered a

large piece of pepperoni and sat at a table near the entrance. Across from him sat a family of four, two little boys with their parents.

The mother cut one of the larger pieces into two smaller ones and gave them to her sons. "Eat this," she said, placing a napkin in their laps. Charlie could hear his own mother's voice saying "call me." The smaller boy with the striped shirt got on his knees in the chair and the napkin slipped to the floor. He ate with both hands and chewed on the pizza as if it was a large piece of bubble gum, taking another bite before he had swallowed the first.

"Swallow first," the mother said. "This isn't a race."

"But the plane," said the son, chewing as he spoke.

"We have plenty of time," she said. He took another bite and chewed it, taking another before he swallowed.

A fat man paused at the news stand in front of Charlie, taking his attention away from the family. He picked up a newspaper, a candy bar, and a car magazine. Charlie could hear the change in his pocket as he dug deep to find the exact amount. He held out a pudgy hand a moment before putting the paper back. He paid for the candy bar and the magazine and walked away without exchanging a word with the woman behind the stand.

The little boy had finished his pizza and watched his older brother lick the sauce from the crust of what was left of his own piece. He moved his tongue slowly along the edge and he looked at his younger brother as he ate.

"Can I have another piece?" said the boy, his eyes still on his brother's crust.

"No," his mother said mechanically.

"But I'm hungry."

"No, you're not."

"Am too." He never looked at her, he only looked at the crust. "I'm hungry," he said again.

The mother did not answer this time. She began to gather the napkins and paper plates and put them on the orange plastic tray. She looked at her husband and asked him what time it was. He answered and Charlie noticed that he was also watching the piece of crust.

"Let's go," she said, rising with the tray in one hand, her purse and coat hanging over the other. Her family still sat at the table.

"We have plenty of time," said the younger son.

The woman emptied the tray into the trash and returned to the table. "Okay, guys, let's go," she said again.

As they walked out into the hallway, the older son, still chewing on his pizza crust, slapped his brother on the top of the head and then scooted up to catch the pace of his parents. Charlie could hear the family

walk down the hallway, the younger boy whining as he told his mother that he had been hit, and her calm, mechanical responses advising him to forget about it.

Charlie sat in front of a large window that looked out on to the runway. He watched three different flights land and pull into their respective gates. Behind him he could hear the anticipation of reuniting friends and families. People came with flowers, balloons and signs. 'Welcome Back Katie! We Missed You!' Charlie thought his own father would most likely be running late from work, or wherever. His mother had warned him about this. "If he isn't there, Charlie, don't move. Wait for him to come get you at the gate. There are strange people in airports, especially airports in California. And Charlie, call me when you get there." Charlie would not have the welcoming party that Katie had. He thought it was alright that he wouldn't be greeted with signs and balloons, he would rather it be that way.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" A girl's voice broke into his thoughts. He turned and saw her, a girl with a large straw bag hanging over one shoulder. She was pointing and Charlie followed her finger to the ashtray that was connected to the chair next to him. "Do you mind? There are no other free ashtrays."

"No, go ahead," he said.

She sat down heavily, exasperated. "I hate airports," she said. "They smell and are always so crowded, full of gross people." She took off her sweatshirt and stuffed it into the straw bag. "And hot," she said. She pulled a smashed pack of Camel Lights from a small leather purse. She turned and offered one to Charlie, looking him in the eyes, but saying nothing.

He declined, silently as well, lifting his hand in resistance. She looked about his age, maybe a little older. She was pretty, he thought, naturally so.

"Bad habit, I know," she said. She lit a cigarette with a match which she waved out and tossed into the metal ashtray between them. "I have been craving this for a week," she said. She crossed her legs and then her arms, lifting the left one when she took a drag from the cigarette. Her fingernails were painted a coral color.

"Are you from San Diego?" she asked. They both looked out the window as a Delta flight landed, the wheels of the plane blurred by the film of the gas.

"No, Cincinnati. You?"

"San Diego. I m finally going home."

They sat quiet and Charlie listened to her exhale and smelled the fruit of her perfume mingle with the smoke. As she sat and smoked her left leg bounced off the knee of her right leg. She ashed after every fourth drag.

It all seemed so systematic to him. Exhale, kick, kick, exhale, ash, kick, kick. And the sound of his mother said, "Call me," and the little boy said, "I'm hungry."

A flight attendant announced that their connecting flight from Cleveland was on schedule. The waiting area was now full of people, mostly families with children. They will be the first to board, thought Charlie, remembering that the elderly, handicapped and 'those with small children' have priority over the other passengers.

The girl put her cigarette out, mashing the orange ashes to black with the butt. "What row are you in?" she asked.

Charlie checked his boarding pass and answered, "Seventeen."

"The back. It's loud in the back. I once had to sit in the last row. I thought I would go deaf by the time I got off the plane. I'm in 14C."

No one sat next to Charlie in row seventeen. He thought of the woman in the purple suit and how she had thanked him. Across the aisle were two business men. They did not speak to each other until lunch was served on small trays that just fit on the tray table that fell back from the seat in front. The man next to the window asked if the other liked carrot cake. He didn't. Neither man ate the carrot cake from the front left square in the tray. Charlie ate only the carrot cake and the roll with butter. He thought about asking the men for their cake, but decided he didn't want it. Charlie looked down at the tray, and remembered the plates his mother used for him when he was younger. They too had the six divisions, one for each of the four food groups, one for the dessert, and one with a circled ridge for the matching cup. A cartoon train had been drawn along the edges of the divisions and on the cup was a red caboose. His mother always made meals that would fill up the five squares and put milk in the caboose cup. She probably said "eat this," like the mother in the airport, but Charlie couldn't remember.

"Hi."

It was the girl from the airport. She said she was going to use the bathroom. "Can I sit with you a while? The man next to me is snoring and I hate to disturb him."

She seemed to have an excuse for sitting with him, Charlie thought. She sat in the aisle seat. "How was your lunch?"

"I only ate the carrot cake."

"Me too. I don't eat things that look like they might walk off my plate before I cut into it. What the hell was that any way?"

"Some kind of casserole, I think. I'm not big on airplane food myself."

"Do you fly a lot?" she asked. She sat sideways in the seat, facing him with one leg tucked under her body.

"No. Actually, this is the first time I'm flying alone. I'm going to see my father. He lives in San Diego."

"Oh." She looked past him out the window. "Divorce?"

"What?" Charlie watched her profile.

"Your parents, are they divorced?"

"They have been since I was five."

She looked at him. "I'm sorry," she said.

"Sorry?" She could hear the surprise in Charlie's voice and faced him.

"Yes, I'm sorry. I don't know how it would be if my parents split up. I wouldn't be able to take it." Her voice was matter of fact and she turned to look out the window again.

"Well, I guess it seems to me like they were never even together," Charlie said. "I have always been with my mom. I guess I have always only had one parent."

"So why are you going to visit your dad?" She brought her knees in to her chest, encircling them with her arms.

"He invited me out. I haven't seen him for five years."

"Did either of them remarry?"

No. Well, my mom didn't. She thinks my dad has a girlfriend." He smiled as he remembered his mother's words. She had tried to sound careless, but he knew that she hoped Charlie would find out the truth. "Your father has a way, you know, when he has someone on his mind. A woman someone, I mean." She laughed to herself, "and he likes to wear this goofy tie with hearts and arrows on it. You should look for that tie, Charlie. Just to see if he still has it. She had looked him straight in the eye, "But don't tell him I said anything." He saw the girl looking at him as he laughed to himself. "My mom's funny," he said.

"Would you mind if one of them got remarried?"

"I never really thought about it."

The girl realized she was intruding on the life of a total stranger. "I'm sorry," she said, "I don't even know you and I'm sitting here in a seat that isn't even mine prying in to your life."

Charlie smiled. "It's okay. At least the flight is a little more interesting." He stuck his hand out towards her, "I'm Charlie, and you're not prying."

She smiled and took his hand, "Beth."

"Hi."

"Hi." A look of embarrassment crossed her face and she stood up suddenly. "And I really did have to go to the bathroom." Charlie smiled as she walked to the back of the plane. He noticed the two business men across the aisle looking at him after she left and looked out the window again.

He could smell her before he saw her. Perfume and a trace of smoke on her clothes. "You don't mind if I sit here a while longer do you?" She still stood in the aisle.

"What about you?" he asked when she was sitting again. "Who were you visiting in Chicago?"

"Oh, I was in Atlanta, visiting my sister."

"That terrible, huh?"

"What?"

"The cigarette. You made it sound as if you'd had a bad time," he explained.

"Well, not exactly. My sister did though. She's just filed for divorce."

Charlie tapped his fingers along the arm of the chair. "I'm sorry," he said.

Beth smiled and they were quiet.

The captain announced that the plane would be landing and the stewardesses checked seat backs, tray tables and seatbelts as they walked down the center of the plane, brushing their manicured hands across the seats as they passed.

"It was nice to meet you, Charlie," Beth said. "Have a nice time with your Dad."

"Thanks. You too. I mean, it was nice to meet you too."

She unfolded her legs from underneath her and paused when she stood in the aisle. "Well, bye."

The business man on the end seat leaned in and watched as Beth returned to her seat and then winked at Charlie. Charlie smiled at the bottom of the tray table in front of him

Beth's parents greeted her at the gate and Charlie watched the three of them walk towards the baggage claim. A man in a suit jogged towards him, and Charlie recognized his father.

They met in the middle of the hall with a handshake. Charlie smiled shyly and his father pulled him to his chest.

"Collect, from your son," his voice cracked.

"It's me, mom. I m here."

"Oh, thank God, Charlie. Take care. Be good. Have fun." Her voice was thin. "And call me, soon."

Through the window Charlie could see his father waving a cab and he heard the drone of the dial tone over the line and hung up the phone.

*Julie Gruen*