

PLANE

—An Excerpt—



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O'Hare International Airport



Ray Jamison stood in front of the departures board in Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, hunting for the status of Eubike Airlines Flight #4938 to Dublin, Ireland. He glanced down at his well-worn watch—a gift from one of his mother's old boyfriends—and noted the time: 1:47 a.m.

Just the idea of setting foot on a new continent brought a smile to his face. For twenty-seven years, Ray had wanted to travel around the world, but this flight marked his first departure from the land of his birth.

While his eyes scanned the departures board, Ray patted his pockets for the tenth time, feeling for his ticket and wallet to be sure they were still exactly where they were supposed to be. Reassured by the telltale lumps, he swung his full attention back to the board. About three-quarters of the way down, he found his flight—Eubike Airlines #4938.

The words “ON TIME” glowed next to the listing in cheerful green letters. The departure time showed as 2:15 a.m., only forty-five minutes away. He needed to get moving, even if there were only two dozen people in the airport.

Ray tilted his two large suitcases onto their wheels and trudged toward the Eubike Air check-in counter. Every step brought an accompanying squeak from one of his suitcase wheels. At some nebulous point in the past, the wheel had gone out of alignment and it seemed determined to tell the world about its troubles. Self-conscious of the loud squeak in the echoing empty airport, Ray walked up to the counter and waited for acknowledgement.

Then he waited some more.

Two women, pasty-faced and fat, sat together behind the counter maybe five feet away from him—pointedly not acknowledging his existence in any way. They looked bored on a nearly mystical level. If not for the plane he had to catch, Ray might've left them to their well-established miasma.

“Uh, hello, can you help me, please?”

“Passport and boarding pass,” demanded the woman on the left, barely glancing up.

Even though she sat five feet away and wasn't smoking, Ray could smell the stale tobacco exuding from her like a carcinogenic perfume. The smell made him want to puke so he switched to mouth breathing in order to minimize the impact to his olfactory sense.

Ray set the requisite paperwork on the counter and waited while the woman on his right stood up and wandered over. She glared intensely at his passport—her eyes going from the picture to Ray and back again. He resisted the urge to make a face at her to lighten the mood, and instead focused his attention on a broken pen sitting on the counter.

While the woman on the right examined his papers, her left-hand counterpart began the process of extricating herself from her chair. She made sure to grunt a bit in a clear effort to make Ray feel bad for flying on their airline. Ray did his best not to take it personally and grinned sheepishly at the woman.

She frowned in return. “Don't just stand there drooling,” she chided, “put your bag on the scale,” indicating the metal scale sitting between them.

Ray set his luggage down with a thump.

The woman eyeballed the bag and announced, “It's too heavy.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Ray asked. He had weighed his bags at home, and he was within the weight limit by five pounds.

“I mean it's too heavy. Did I stutter?” she asked, a veiled threat inherent in her voice.

Ray looked at the scale's digital readout. It read fifty-five pounds.

“Your website says the bag can weigh up to sixty pounds without penalty. My bag's five pounds under.”

The woman shook her head, the waddles around her neck jiggling, "Nope. Weight limit is fifty pounds," she used a tone of voice that made it clear the limit would be fifty pounds even if Ray had the president of the airline standing in front of her, explicitly insisting that the policy dictated otherwise.

Ray tried anyway, "But—" he began, but then she interrupted him.

"Fifty pounds, Sir. Either you lose the five pounds or we've got to charge you an extra \$200 for an overweight bag."

Ray sighed. He'd lost even before he walked up to the counter. If he kept pushing, one of the ladies would hit the silent alarm and he'd spend the next two hours insisting that he'd never once said the word "bomb."

He had a jacket—that would weigh a few pounds. He took it out of the suitcase and put it on over the t-shirt and button-up shirt he already wore. He put the bag back onto the scale. Fifty-one pounds.

In a futile attempt to catch a break, Ray looked at the woman with eyes that pled, "Can we let it go?" She looked at the scale and met Ray's eyes. "It's still a pound over," she said with barely contained glee.

Working overtime to keep calm, Ray unzipped the bag and took out several rolled-up pairs of socks, cramming them into the pockets of the pants until the scale mercifully switched its digital readout to fifty pounds.

"There, it's within weight," Ray announced, triumphant.

"Yes, congratulations," the woman replied, her tone flat and distinctly unimpressed.

She took the first bag off the scale and indicated the other, which thankfully weighed only forty-eight pounds. Ray moved to put his socks into this second, lighter bag, but the woman hurriedly dumped both bags onto the conveyor belt, keeping her back to him until they'd disappeared into the black maw in the wall that devoured luggage all day long.

Ray took two deep breaths, and tried to think positive thoughts. The women surely hated their jobs, and if he raised a ruckus, they could make sure his luggage ended up on the wrong continent. At least he wouldn't have to buy socks in Dublin when his baggage inevitably disappeared.

The second woman watched all of these shenanigans in silence before stepping forward and handing Ray a boarding pass. "Have a good flight," she offered, giving him a very odd smile that he couldn't interpret.

Glancing again at his watch, Ray jogged to the security line, dreading the sight of a mob of people. He came into view and sighed with relief—only five people were in line. Grinning, he dropped into the queue behind a man in a well-tailored suit. The man glanced at Ray, gave him a disdainful look and turned away again. Clearly not a man interested in being his line buddy.

Ray looked around at the empty cattle line and the myriad warning signs posted everywhere about the dangers of shampoo bottles and shoes. While he waited, Ray fought off the vague feeling of guilt he always had when he went through a security check of any kind. He pictured interrogation under bright lights and wanted to start yelling at everybody to fight such a fascist practice.

When Ray's turn came, he took off his shoes and set them on the conveyor belt. He patted his pockets and came out with his keys, which he tossed into one of the handy plastic bins along with his backpack. As he stepped forward into the cattle-chute that led to the x-ray machine, a bored-looking security agent in a blue V-neck cop-sweater stepped forward and informed him that random search parameters chose him to face additional scrutiny from the backscatter radiation machine.

Ray groaned. The only thing he hated more than the security theater at airports were the special screenings. He'd always belonged to the "if you don't want people to try blowing you up, don't do stuff that makes people want to blow you up" school of foreign policy.

"Yeah, sorry, I'm going to go ahead and opt out of that," Ray replied with a shrug.

The security guard made no secret that Ray's decision pissed him off. He half-growled, "If you refuse the x-ray scan, we are going to have to perform a manual search. Refusal to submit to either form of search will lead to your ejection from the airport."

Ray looked at the guard with rank insincerity and said, "I understand the need for security to protect us from the bad guys. You can do the manual search."

"Yes, *sir*," the guard said, emphasizing "sir" so Ray knew he thought of him as anything but.

The radiation didn't matter. He had looked up the machine on the internet years earlier and the process sounded perfectly safe. He refused the machine simply as a personal form of protest. In the sixties, people went to marches and sit-ins. Ray made the security people at the airport jump through their own hoops.

The guard—his nametag identified him as Jim—walked Ray over to a mat with two yellow footprints on it.

“Place your feet on the footpads. Do you have any contraband on your person—such as knives, guns, tasers or any other item of that nature?” Jim asked.

“No,” Ray replied, purposely putting an annoying level of cheer into his voice.

“Needles?”

“Absolutely not, Jim,” he laughed.

“Is there a reason you refused to go through the x-ray machine today, sir?”

Still being painfully polite, Ray answered, “Well Jim, I'm happy to go through the regular machine, but I'm not going through that other one—it causes cancer—I read about it online.”

Jim said, “I assure you, it's very safe.”

“That's what they used to say about cigarettes,” Ray replied, mostly to confuse him.

It worked. Jim stopped asking questions. He poked and felt Ray up, clearly unhappy to be doing it. Ray took some satisfaction in knowing the guard had to do this all day, every day. As the guard neared the end of his search, another guard came over with another passenger, a woman in her late fifties with unnaturally poufy hair.

One leads to many!

The guards exchanged annoyed looks, which only made her resistance more satisfying. If everyone fought back, then the rules would change. Nobody wanted to be feeling up fat Americans all day.

“Have a good flight, sir,” the guard told Ray, walking away. Based on his tone, Jim hoped the plane would crash nose-first into the side of a mountain.

Ray picked up his stuff from the conveyor belt. After putting his shoes back on, he stopped and picked up a pack of gum, a candy bar and a bottle of apple juice from the horribly overpriced airport convenience store.

He began walking down an almost comically long corridor, lit up like the sun with a mile of fluorescent bulbs lined up like soldiers. Eventually he reached the second gauntlet: the customs gate, which granted him access to the international wing of the airport. At the late hour, only one of at least thirty security checkpoints remained open. The only open slot had no line. The lights on the unused side of the large room had been turned off, which contrasted harshly against the bright concourse and gave the whole place a slightly sinister air.

Focused on catching his plane after the protest delay, Ray noticed the ambience only peripherally, as he wanted to get through his customs interview and get to his plane.

As it turned out, nothing remotely interesting happened. A bored-looking guard of about twenty-five with no eyebrows asked why Ray intended to go to Ireland. He answered and that was that. The desultory guard stamped his passport and he entered into the weird political limbo found beyond customs.

Following signs displayed in every conceivable language, Ray wandered toward his gate, observing the various stores lining the concourse—almost all of them closed. He passed an open bar and considered going inside for a drink, but he would have to stay up through the entire first day to have any hope of avoiding ferocious jet lag. Alcohol would only make staying awake more difficult.

Instead of ordering a shot of bourbon, Ray continued to his gate, wanting to plug in his tablet and stock up on as much battery power as he could. Scanning the terminal, he identified plenty of open seats, but decided to head over toward an attractive woman reading a paperback novel. Ray walked over, as casually as possible, and sat down next to her, leaving a single empty space between himself and the pretty girl.

She must've just purchased the book because she only appeared to be on page five or six and the spine had no creases. The novelty of seeing someone read an actual physical book made Ray smile.

He quickly glanced down at her ankles. Ray liked ankles. Not feet. Feet were gross. Ankles though, Ray loved a well-formed set of ankles. Hers were lovely.

In an attempt to put the woman and her ankles out of his head, Ray slid his tablet from his overstuffed backpack and tapped his reading app to open David Bohm's *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*. He immersed himself in Bohm's fascinating theories regarding the holographic nature of reality.

Five minutes later, a question interrupted his reading.

"Why do you have socks sticking out of your pockets?"

Ray looked up. The pretty woman with the beautiful ankles waited for his reply.

Mortified, he stammered, "Th- they said my bag weighed too much and I didn't want to have to wear two sweaters all the way to Ireland."

Reluctantly, he forced himself to look her in the eye. When he did, she smiled and replied, "I actually made a bet with myself. I said, 'Self, I bet there is a perfectly good explanation for why this guy has socks in his pockets. And, if there isn't, I'm going to report him to the authorities because I don't want to get on an international flight with some crazy person who packs his socks in his pockets for no good reason.' Turns out, you *did* have a good explanation. Which is good for both of us, because now I don't have to turn you in to the authorities for torture."

"I'm glad I passed your test." He reached over and shook her hand, "My name's Ray. Ray Jamison."

"I'm Amy," she replied. "Nice to meet you. Is Ray short for Raymond?"

Looking away, he replied, "No, it's just Ray—like a ray of light—it isn't short for anything."

"Oh, okay."

They sat in semi-uncomfortable silence until Ray said, "So, why are you going to Ireland? Vacation?"

Amy made a face. "Nothing as simple as that. My mother went over there on vacation a week ago. Then she slipped, fell, and broke her hip. Thanks to Europe's universal healthcare, they're fixing her up for a few hundred bucks, which is awesome—but I still need to go over and help take care of her. I definitely wouldn't call it a vacation. Helen—that's my mother—she's freaking out, acting like she's been left alone in the rainforest with cannibals instead of in a nice hotel in Dublin where everyone speaks English and treats old American ladies with nothing but respect. Still, Mom's a drama queen. She can't help herself, it's been the same my whole life."

"What good are parents if they can't cause you problems?" Ray joked.

Although Ray attempted to be playful, his words were full of bitter irony. He had lost his mother at eighteen and would give anything to hear her nag him again on any subject.

Ray made no mention of this to Amy.

With no way to be aware of Ray's omission, she agreed enthusiastically with his sentiment. "That's it, exactly. My mother seems determined to drive me crazy and I don't understand why."

They drifted back into silence. Ray assumed their conversation had ended, but then she asked, "So how about you? Are you going to Ireland on vacation or did your mother fall on the way home from the pub too?"

He chuckled. "I'm on my way to my first international conference."

Amy's right eyebrow raised. "What kind of conference?"

"Philosophy." Ray's voice betrayed a certain concern that his answer might make him look like a nerd.

"Ah, so then you're either studying to be a professor or to be unemployed. Which is it?"

"Neither. I just like philosophy. I'm going as a kind of fluke, actually."

"Well this sounds like it's a juicy story."

He shrugged a dismissal. "Not so much. Remember, we're talking about a philosophy conference. I don't know that juiciness in any form has ever entered into such an event—although I certainly wouldn't object if it did."

To Ray's delight, Amy laughed and reached across the empty chair, setting her hand briefly on his shoulder.

"No, really," she encouraged him, "tell me."

In order to draw attention away from the flush he felt rushing into his cheeks, he said, "Well, I'm a student at the University of Chicago—a senior."

"Majoring in philosophy, I presume?"

"No, I'm studying history—specifically the social justice movements of the 1960s."

"So then—"

“Why am I going to a philosophy conference in Dublin? I’m glad you asked. As a result of needing a credit, I took a class on the philosophy of mind. It turned out to have this professor, a guy named Brian Hart. He’s a lunatic and a genius—the only person I’ve ever met who genuinely questions the reality of everything. I remember one time we were talking during his office hours and he got this far-off look on his face. Then he turned to me and asked, ‘Do you ever get the feeling that everyone else in the world is just a product of your own imagination?’”

“Ah, so he’s a nutjob.”

Ray frowned. “That’s just it—he’s one of the sanest people I’ve ever met. I mean, yeah, he’s nuts, but at the same time, he’s really not. I’m not going to argue that questioning the reality of reality is a good thing for everyone, but for Professor Hart, living in his little academic bubble in Hyde Park, it’s working. His lectures are really out there, but his insanity comes from a really rational place.”

Amy nodded, stretched out her legs, and turned her ankles in a way that made Ray practically pant. She said, “I can say from experience, if you ever see somebody like that at a party doing coke—run the other way. Talk about not being able to get a word in edgewise.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’m sure there’s a story there too.” Ray paused, creating a chance for her to speak.

“No, finish yours! It has a nutty professor.”

“Right. So, three days ago, in the middle of class, Hart says he’s supposed to give a talk at a philosophy conference in Dublin and he can’t go. I guess he made the decision at the spur of the moment, so he decided to send one of his students instead. He had only one prerequisite: the chosen student had to have an up-to-date passport, which I had. I’d never used it, but I had one. There were about twenty-five students in the lecture hall eligible to go. Hart told us to write an essay explaining what we would get out of a trip to Dublin to present a philosophy lecture. He gave us only until the end of class, and the essay had to be written by hand—in pen—no computers of any kind allowed. I knew he’d never pick my essay, there were several philosophy majors in the class that were always kissing up to him. Since I knew they’d get it, I just wrote, ‘I want to go to Dublin because I don’t believe it really exists. If I go to where it allegedly is, I’ll find out if I’m right—or—barring that, I’ll find out that my mind is powerful enough to manifest a place called Ireland.’ Then I drew a big smiley face.”

“And you turned that in?” Amy laughed.

“Yup. Two sentences—maybe two and a half in as many minutes. There were people scribbling madly away on their reasons until the last minute, getting down as much information as they could. I don’t know why, but he picked mine. So here I am.” Ray offered Amy his best charming smile.

An announcement came through the terminal speaker system, “...Flight 4938 to Dublin will begin boarding in the next five minutes. Will our first-class passengers, and those in Seating Group A, please make their way to the front and back gates. Also, any passengers traveling with small children or the elderly should make their way to the gateway as well.”

Amy looked up at the sound of the announcement.

“Looks like that’s our call. What seating group are you in?”

“Group B. Professor Hart didn’t spring for the upgrade. I suppose I shouldn’t complain—this entire trip is free. I even get a reimbursement for meals, up to a hundred bucks a day. I don’t think I’ve ever eaten a hundred bucks—worth of food in *three* days, let alone one.”

Amy smiled. “I’m in group B too. Wanna sit together?”

For nearly five minutes, Ray had been considering different ways to ask her to sit with him. He could hardly believe his luck that she did the heavy lifting.

“I’d love to sit with you,” he answered, his tone distinctly not-aloof.

They got up. Ray said, “My mother would be upset with me if I didn’t offer to carry your bag for you.”

Ray knew that Amy was perfectly capable of carrying her own bag. He imagined her parents talking in her ear, with her father telling her to hoist the bag on her shoulder and tell this Ray she didn’t need a man to save her or fight her battles. Her mother, on the other hand, would tell her to let Ray carry the bag and be grateful to have found a man who still knew how to be a gentleman. He waited to see whose advice she might follow.

“Sure! It’s heavy and I hate carrying it.” She handed him the bag.

Ray took the bag and pretended the weight crushed him, then fell to one knee in mock collapse. He had no problem getting back up—a fact he exaggerated to some degree. He wanted her to know he wasn't the typical academic type, the kind of guy who deals in primary source materials housed in the dark, cavernous basements of government buildings and college libraries.

"What number are you in line?" Ray asked.

"B-24."

"I'm B-9, so I'll go in first and save you a seat. Do you prefer the window or the aisle?"

"I'd like the window, please."

Nodding, "Front, back, or middle of the plane?"

"Front. I hate having to wait for everyone in front of me to grab their luggage."

More nodding. "Okay, I'll sit as close to the front as I can and still get a window seat." Ray handed her bag back to her as she lined up in the area labeled B20–30.

Ray went ahead to the area reserved for B01–10. He showed his boarding number to a chubby woman standing near the back of the section with a hamburger in each hand. Through a mouthful of food she said, "I'm B08—you're right behind me."

He took his place behind the woman and watched as she inhaled the burgers like they were made of smoke. Waiting patiently, Ray tried not to get caught while glancing back at Amy. Every time he did, she was looking back at him.

This exact thing had happened to him a thousand times before—in his imagination—but never in real life. A little voice in the back of his head told him she would get on the plane and hurry right past wherever he sat, taking a seat as far away from him as possible. Even when he chided the voice, telling it *she* had asked to sit with *him*, not the other way around, it refused to be silent.

In order to distract himself, Ray took a closer look at the other people waiting to board the plane. He saw a couple standing arm-in-arm, her head resting on *his* shoulder. Ray smiled involuntarily—largely because he pictured Amy with her head on his shoulder. Perhaps during the flight, she might accidentally fall asleep and her head would loll to the side onto his shoulder. After all, it took a long time to fly across the Atlantic, even in one of Eubike Airlines AL7997 Super-Liners.

A number of bland, interchangeable businessmen in modestly priced suits paired with utterly boring ties milled about like bottom-feeding fish. Ray looked at them and saw nothing but bodies with blank faces. No eyes, no features, just protoplasm taking up space—their lives utterly unremarkable except in the way that all life is profound.

A few families milled around—a father fretted over a little boy who insisted his "head would explode" if the father didn't hand over his comic book. A woman held a swaddled baby under her arm like a football while her husband wrestled with the family's carry-on luggage. A group of eight girls, all in their early teens, stood around in identical outfits identifying themselves as the Lindblom Math and Science Academy Jr. Chess Team. Their four chaperones buzzed around the girls like gakked-up insects on a coca plant. An old man stood alone, looking out the window into the darkness of the night.

The line started to move and Ray returned his attention toward it.

An expressionless attendant scanned his ticket one last time and he entered the mechanical umbilicus linking the terrestrial to the heavenly. The process made Ray uneasy, like he was being born in reverse. He snuck one final glance at Amy and turned the corner.

Seeing the interior of the plane impressed Ray so much, he forgot about Amy for a second. The cabin of the AL7997 Super-Liner looked more like the living room of a wealthy person with a lounge chair fetish than the interior of an airplane. Each seat looked luxurious and cushiony, the kind of chair that invited you to snuggle up and read a book. The lighting gave off a soft, pleasant glow and the carpet beneath his feet felt thick and expensive. He had expected the plane to be nice, but never considered it would be *this* nice.

A new airline, Eubike prided itself on reversing the trend of uncomfortable passenger seating. Instead, they built bigger planes, utilizing extensive electrical parts run through panels in the wings capable of absorbing solar radiation even at night in order to cut down on fuel costs.

Seeing the beauty of flying in coach, Ray wondered what the first-class section looked like. Unlike normal airlines, Eubike put first-class in the back. First-class passengers also entered the plane by a

separate entrance. When Ray looked down the aisle to where first-class started, he saw they'd created the separation by using an actual door, not the traditional curtain.

This put Ray off. Giving first-class a separate entrance made a certain amount of sense, and he had wondered since the first time he saw a plane why they had only a single door in the front and not doors on either end. But separating the plane with a hard door seemed racist or classist—or something bad ending in “-ist.”

Ray put the doors out of his mind and instead concentrated on finding the best-possible seats for himself and Amy. He glanced around and spotted a pair on the left side of the aisle, six rows in front of the wing. The fact that there were only two seats eliminated the possibility of some third idiot coming in and talking about life insurance or credit default swaps for the entire flight, screwing up whatever miniscule amount of game Ray possessed.

He made a beeline for his chosen seats and sat down, dropping his backpack into the one adjacent to save it. Sitting down turned out to be a much more pleasant experience than Ray had anticipated. The soft material could give any Lazy-Boy a run for its money. Plus, the seats were loaded with amenities. The armrest featured a battery charger and a small LED screen. It even offered massage and the ability to lay the seat completely flat—a feature Ray couldn't help but briefly fantasize about utilizing with Amy. Like most males over the age of fifteen, he had long dreamt of joining the fabled “mile-high club.”

Taking a copy of *SkyMall* out of a pouch on the side of the seat, Ray tried to amuse himself and pretend like he had any interest in a dog bark translator. However, he had to admit he felt an urge to purchase a rather nifty Hong-Kong Fuey lawn ornament. Every ten seconds or so, he looked up at the entrance, searching for Amy.

When she walked onto the plane, Ray's heart rate increased. He tried to appear nonchalant when their eyes met. She smiled when she spotted him and waved, which only caused his heart to beat that much faster.

“Wow, I had no idea this airline was so swanky,” she declared, plopping down in the seat next to him as soon as she removed her backpack.

“I know, right? The seats have massage.”

“Do you think they give happy endings?” Amy asked. Then she blanched a little.

“I think you have to be sitting in first-class to get the happy-ending chairs,” he grinned.

“That explains the door.”

“I don't think anything can accurately explain the door,” Ray frowned.

Amy shrugged, “The Unites States, while giving lip service to being a democratic country, has always been an elitist oligarchy, in reality. We have to face the truth that the oligarchs have gained enough power that they aren't particularly interested in keeping their disdain for the rest of us a secret anymore. It's not like anyone who seriously opposes their interests will ever gain the necessary traction to overthrow the intense wealth concentration of the richest tenth of one percent of this country.”

Ray gave her a look and then he shrugged. “Or, I guess you *can* accurately explain the door. In two sentences no less—impressive.”

Amy gave him a demure smile. Ray didn't think he'd ever been so attracted to a woman in his life. To go from happy-endings to insightful political commentary in the space of fifteen seconds, he didn't think such women existed outside of his imagination.

They passed the next ten minutes exchanging snarky whispers about the other passengers as they walked past. The jokes started out tame, but the game quickly degenerated into silliness.

Amy said, “You see that tall guy over there in the sweater?”

“The one with the crazy geometric pattern on it?”

“That's not a pattern. That's a secret code. He's a corporate spy!”

“A secret-code sweater? That's quite sneaky, isn't it?”

“Oh yes. When you're dealing with secrets on the level that man sees on a daily basis, you have to use the most state-of-the-art techniques to keep your secrets safe.”

“State-of-the-art, like knitting.”

“Exactly. Knitting, macramé, needlepoint, whatever it takes. He's got the secret to the orgasm ray knit right into that sweater. You have to respect the sweater.”

“The what now?” *Did she just say “orgasm ray?”*

She repeated it, “It’s the Acme Orgasm Ray. Think of the time it’d save! The same guy invented a type of ice cream that makes you lose weight, but that recipe’s hidden in the clever bastard’s shoe.”

When the final passenger found their seat, the attendants sealed the doors and began their safety lecture. An overly enthusiastic bleach-blonde woman in her fifties named Marianne with almost cartoonishly large eyes pointed to the emergency exits and lavatories while a dispassionate guy at the front of the plane droned his memorized speech into a microphone.

Since every comedian who had ever lived had a bit about the safety lecture—and Ray loved stand-up (George Carlin has the best safety bit of all time)—Ray felt like he knew the rules about the margarine cup airbags as well as he needed to.

“Should I ask Marianne if the clasp goes over and around the buckle or vice versa?” Amy asked, roughly quoting the same Carlin bit Ray had just remembered.

“You like Carlin?”

Amy smiled a broad grin. “He’s a genius. You seemed like the kind of guy who would know him.”

“Why?”

“My friends and I usually refer to him as the Philosopher Carlin. Since he died, it’s really sad how the internet generation has never heard of him. It’s the downside to our fast-forward culture.”

Considering her answer regarding the door to first-class, he said, “The faster you’re moving the harder it is to take the time to properly look and see where you’ve been. If you’re staring backwards, you’ll run into an unexpected obstacle ahead.”

Not missing a beat Amy replied, “And if you don’t look back, you’re doomed to make the same mistake twice.”

Ray nodded. “Exactly. It’s a sticky wicket. Erring too much on either side has profound consequences.”

“As does forgetting your seat cushion can also be used as a flotation device,” Amy joked.

They continued to share witticisms with each other while the plane taxied slowly off of the concourse and into the line for take-off. Ray looked around and guessed the coach section of the plane was at about seventy-five percent capacity. Open seats were scattered throughout the cabin.

Yawning, Amy stared out the window and said, “I don’t mind flying at all, except for the take-off and landing. I hate the feeling of shooting up into the air. That’s why I like to sit here. If I can look out and see the world getting smaller, it makes me less queasy. It’s weird, because it works the other way when I ride roller coasters.”

“I *love* roller coasters!” Ray enthused.

“Have you ever been on the Superman ride at Great America?” Amy asked, equally happy to hear his interest.

If he would’ve had an engagement ring in his pocket at that moment, Ray would’ve asked Amy to marry him. Not only did Ray love roller coasters, but he loved Superman the most.

“Dude, you’re seriously freaking me out right now,” he said.

Amy laughed. “Dude! Why?”

“Ever since I was a little kid, I’ve had dreams about flying. I used to love going to sleep because I knew I always had a chance to fly there. Batman was my favorite superhero overall, but I wanted Superman’s ability to fly more than anything in the world. Sitting on a plane and going up into the sky—it’s certainly convenient—but it isn’t flying. Flying is what Superman does: no vehicle, one fist pointed at the horizon, belly to the ground, whizzing through the air. That Superman ride simulated the way it felt to fly in my dreams. For fifteen years, I could only feel that sensation when I was asleep. All of a sudden, it was real. The first time the ride snapped—”

“—backwards and upside down,” Amy finished for him. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. The g-force as you do that backwards roll—it’s unlike any other roller coaster.”

“Exactly. Dear god, you really *do* know what I’m talking about.”

“I do.” Amy smiled.

Sitting forward conspiratorially, Ray asked, “So, do you want to know a trick?”

Amy shrugged, “Sure.”

Ray pushed his chin into his chest and whispered, "Most people don't know this, but when you go to Great America you can keep riding without going to the end of the line. All you have to do is get off the ride at the end and wait. If there's an empty seat on the departing car, you can jump into it. No one cares, and there's almost always a seat because people want to ride together and it creates gaps. After I rode Superman the first time, I just hung around and poached rides nonstop until the place closed. After a while, the attendants were pointing seats out to me. I think it ranks among the happiest days of my life, the day I spent flying."

Nodding appreciatively, Amy said, "That's a good trick, but I never had to do that."

"Did you work there or something?"

Amy grinned, "Nah, I just ask the guy if I can stay and he generally lets me. I flirted a lot to stay on that Superman ride. At one point, I talked myself into six rounds in a row in the front seat."

"That is not a courtesy extended to males very often."

Amy shrugged, "Considering the downside is that I have pervo guys hitting on me all of the time, I think a few extra rides at Great America are warranted."

Oh God, she thinks I'm a pervo guy.

"I'm sure that sucks," Ray said, clearly shutting down.

"Not you," Amy blurted back.

"Huh?"

"You're not a pervo guy. You didn't hit on me, I talked to you first. I could tell you wanted to talk to me, but you respected my privacy."

Ray gave a sigh of relief. "That's good, I really thought you meant me."

Amy reached over and slipped her hand into his. It sat limply for a second until he registered her intention. All at once, his hand firmed up around hers. Ray had big hands with soft palms and calloused fingertips, the mark of the student.

"I don't want you to let go of my hand until we are safely up in the air," Amy said.

"I'd be happy to hold your hand for as long as you want."

She smiled. "Thank you."

They lapsed into silence as the four giant GE90-115B jet engines ramped up their power, creating the high-pitched whine of air's conversion into raw thrust. As the plane really started to get going, the g-force pushed Ray back into his seat. He enjoyed the feeling, even if it didn't compare to the Superman ride. Judging from the amount of pressure she put on his hand, Amy didn't feel the same way.

"If the diamond industry ever hits a shortage, they can just stick some coal in your hand during take-offs," Ray said.

"Oh, ha-ha!" She stuck her tongue out at him.

"You know what we need?" Ray asked.

"What?"

"We need to get your mind off of flying in an airplane," he suggested, offering the obvious.

"What do you propose?" she asked. "Anything to get my mind off of planes running into the ground like a big lawn dart."

Ray swallowed, gathered up a dose of courage and said, "I'm thinking I would like to go out with you on a date."

"A date?" Amy asked.

"Yeah," he confirmed with a grin.

Amy made a show of thinking before she said, "Okay, assuming I'm willing to go on a date with you, how do you suggest that is going to work? You do realize we're on a plane?"

With a shrug, Ray replied, "I'm thinking the one thing I can pull off is the most classic of dates: dinner and a movie."

She considered before answering. "Well, Eubike is supposed to have the best food of all of the airlines. In a way, it's like taking me some place swanky."

"Only the swankiest when I take out a lady," he gave a sarcastic wink.

"And the movie?"

Ray shrugged, "I have a tablet in my bag, so we can watch just about anything. What kind of movies do you like? Please don't say romantic comedies. Even if you like them, I'd rather you start farting around me than for you to say that you like romantic comedies."

"You take movies seriously."

"Not really, I just hate the idea behind romantic love."

They didn't get a chance to talk any more about their date or the nature of romantic love because the sound of a humongous "WHOOOMP-BOOM" cut off any further conversation. It sounded like someone had fired a cannon inside the plane's cabin. The boom was followed by a rapidly intensifying white light that grew much brighter than the sun in less than a second.

Then, all at once, everything went black.