Aviophobia

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I

The January day SkyWest Flight 1834 smashed into a private two-seater plane midair over my elementary school, I was at recess. Some of us snatched at clothes drifting down from the sky because we thought they should be handed over to the school's lost and found. We didn't know yet of all the lost things that could never be returned: a jagged wing blocking my friend's front door; a pilot's black leather seat perched on my neighbor's roof; the lives of ten passengers, captains, and crew. Grown-ups spoke in whispers about the carnage found in backyards and closed roads and the porch of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church.

When the disaster crew finished combing our neighborhood and the reporters left, I drew pictures of angels, their waxy Crayon smiles indifferent to the broken baggage and bodies I drew along the bottom of the page. Those angels were safe now, and happy, my parents said. I knew God wanted me to believe it.

Months after the plane crash, I found a rusting metal fragment in the sodden schoolyard, a piece of a gear or an oil pump or some other engineering artifact. I couldn't shake the knowledge that people who dared take their feet off solid ground sometimes flew to pieces.

II

My family moved away from our lower-middle-class neighborhood near Salt Lake International and ended up in a small country house with a view of Russ McDonald Field beyond the cow pasture. World

War II–era stunt planes lumbered off McDonald's runway and barrel-rolled over my house while I counted each second the engines stalled.

My senior year, I met BeckyAnn, a swimmer with serious blue eyes darker than the deep end. She wasn't like me, bracing for impact every time one of those acrobatic planes sputtered overhead. She'd moved eight hundred miles from her coastal home because her parents were going through a nasty divorce, and she wasn't worried. She had to babysit her younger sisters while her mom went back to school, and she couldn't go to college herself next year with the rest of us, and she wasn't worried. She moved through life with the steadiness of an early morning lap swim like she was slicing through the county pool instead of a riptide.

Sometimes she invited friends to swim after hours at the pool where she worked as an instructor. When she dove in headfirst, the water lapped against me bobbing along in the shallow end, my feet safely touching the floor.

III

A pilot once suggested that to conquer fear of flying, I should imagine the airplane swimming. Air and water are both fluids, both buoyant. Just as a cruise liner won't sink under normal conditions, planes rarely fall out of the sky.

But sometimes they do. The problem with phobias is you can always find a reason to justify them.

On another January day, one of the rickety planes I'd watched with such suspicion nose-dived into the snowy pasture and exploded, leaving a black crater in the ground.

Pilot error, the reports often say when there's an air disaster, as if that should make the public feel safer—as if piloting errors don't occur for me on a daily basis while I navigate through this life with anxiety.

IV

I come from a family who expresses great faith and believes in the divine purpose of death, all while going to extreme lengths to stay alive. For me, the friction between the need for spiritual surrender and physical survival is constant.

I wonder if my grandmother felt the same tension. For most of her life, she didn't have a driver's license, and she never owned the deadliest of modern machines—a microwave oven. She knew it would cause cancer.

In her defense, her socioeconomic demographic included many women who didn't drive cars or own microwaves, but to hear Mom tell the story, avoidance probably played a part in her choices. My grandmother put a dent in her dad's car the first time she took the wheel, so she decided driving wasn't for her. Living in the suburbs without public transit, with a husband not sober enough to drive, did little to change her mind.

Grandma succumbed to cancer at age fifty-six. Her brothers died at forty-seven and almost fifty-seven. The beginnings of disease were probably lurking in their cells since long before microwave ovens became popular, since the day they were born with unlucky genes or began eating food grown in contaminated soil. The military had engaged in open air nuclear testing, and no one can say if my grandma's family was affected by living downwind.

It's hard to feel peace when logic tells you you're never safe, even when you don't fly, even when you stay home and don't drive cars or use microwave ovens.

That's probably the biggest reason I'm on earth, to learn the hardest lesson. I must surrender my trust to God without him promising my physical preservation in return.

V

The first time I mustered the faith to board an aircraft, a budget airline that didn't assign seats, I prayed for my life. I also prayed I'd get a window seat. If I was going to compromise my safety on a fast ride home, I wanted to make sure I got the full experience. As runway peeled away from wing, I laughed nervously, startling the passengers around me. I was twenty-two the first time I saw the earth bend and twist like warped photographs in the sun as the airplane banked.

I felt I'd cleared a huge personal hurdle by flying without passing out. I didn't know it was only the beginning. Each time I fly, fainting becomes a real possibility. The fear grows worse each year, as if I can sense the odds getting stacked higher against me each time I'm reckless enough to leave the earth's crust.

For six years, I had a job requiring international travel. I put up with frightening aborted landings and turbulent lightning storms because keeping my job seemed more responsible than staying home. But the final straw came. On my last work trip, I got stranded during a layover in London. The ticketing agent claimed the air traffic control software was on the fritz, so all transatlantic travel was delayed indefinitely. In a

moment of panic, I envisioned staying in Britain forever, eating strange pickled sandwiches I was fed on the flight from America.

It was only a few months after the 2006 London plot to blow up planes over the ocean came to light that I sat at my Heathrow gate watching airline employees check the passports of three Middle Eastern men sitting beside me. I worried and wondered why different airline employees checked their passports four times while no one approached me. Racial profiling? Or extra caution for passengers resembling those on the terror watch list?

The crew finally said that the technical problems had been resolved and allowed the suspect passengers, and me, to board. I didn't have room in my racing heart to feel guilty for my blatant biases. I only had room in my chest to keep breathing, fearing someone might find a way to blow up the plane. The airline employees must have feared it too, I reasoned, or they wouldn't have tried to cancel our flight in the first place by blaming a supposed software problem.

I prayed in the panicked way a child cries over its mother's soothing voice, too worked up to hear the comfort. I knew full well God might not intervene since he didn't seem to mind welcoming his children home.

After we landed, a coworker on the same flight told me that a few rows behind me, airline attendants had sat on either side of the three men, taking up a center row. The men had stood and gone to use the loo much more often than seemed normal, two loitering outside the door while one went in. The flight attendants had hung around the men like straitjackets for eight transatlantic hours.

Before I had time to kiss the ground and vow to never fly again, my boyfriend called with two important things to tell me. He was sure he wanted to marry me and hoped I'd feel the same, and BeckyAnn was dying.

VI

I'd visited BeckyAnn in the hospital after her first surgery six months before.

On my way to her intensive care unit room, I passed an old roommate in the hall, a nurse who was now married and wearing maternity scrubs over her swelling belly. She beamed like she was happy to carry her growing child through her rotations among the critically ill.

In BeckyAnn's dimmed room, she was swollen, too. Her swimmer's figure had turned round like the grapefruit-sized tumor just removed from her abdomen. Her skin was pallid against the pillow, but her eyes were deep and clear when she said, "They found nodules on my liver. Which means I have cancer."

Not just Cushing's disease, usually caused by a benign tumor of the adrenal gland pumping the body full of cortisol and stretching the skin like a too-full water balloon. BeckyAnn had adrenocortical carcinoma, a rare cancer with a five-year survival rate of less than twenty percent.

We were only twenty-six. Less than three years ago, I'd been maid of honor at her wedding, and I'd teased her about how she was finally going to have to kick her childhood friend Beardog—a ratty pillow-sized stuffed animal—out of her bed. Chris and BeckyAnn weren't married long when her teenage sister asked them to adopt her baby.

I knew what was coming from the minute BeckyAnn said *cancer.*

The beeping oxygen monitor supporting her recovery had as much power to save her as masks dropping from an overhead panel on a plane spiraling to the ground.

VII

BeckyAnn wondered if the cancer were somehow her fault, if she'd allowed subconscious stress to generate the deadly tumors taking over her body. But she still did what I'm afraid to do. She let go. Lifting her aching her feet off solid ground, she willingly surrendered to a current no one but God could see.

By the end, she had a strong feeling there was something else she was meant to do, and it wasn't here. She felt spiritually buoyed up even as her body stalled.

The day of her funeral, Beardog lay in the casket, his face so ragged he didn't seem to have a nose anymore.

"Oh, good. Beardog is finally being laid to rest," I said to our mutual friend, Melissa.

"Yeah, I think that's a very good idea," Melissa said. It felt good to be a little irreverent on this worst day.

As we joked, I felt a ripple in the atmosphere. Like the times I'd been standing in the shallow end of the county pool and BeckyAnn dove in, the air seemed to splash against me—moving with her laughter.

She was here. I felt sure of it.

And she was safe now, and happy. I knew God wanted me to believe it, even as I watched her lost husband and child circling the room like they would never be found.

VIII

The winter day I left Washington, D.C., in a freezing rainstorm to take my family home for Christmas, I tried to believe I was doing the right

thing by dragging an innocent five-year-old onto the deadliest of modern machines, a Boeing 777.

On takeoff, I gripped my husband's hand and appealed to his mechanical engineering expertise. He explained to me—again—how flying is routine; how lift works; how 775,000 pounds can stay in the sky.

I tried gratitude and listened to "Come, Come, Ye Saints" on my iPod, imagining my pioneer ancestors having to walk across the barren flatlands, dragging their luggage in handcarts below, while I'd most likely arrive in under four hours.

I looked for comfort in comparison. I watched a documentary about astronauts blasting off to the moon, hoping I'd feel closer to earth at a mere 35,000 feet.

My fears and prayers thrummed in the background with the noise of jet engine turbines.

For me, it seems trust and fear will never be mutually exclusive.

Spiritual surrender. Physical survival. The impulses cling to each other like flesh to spirit.

Though I can't seem to stop fearing the day I die, I also paradoxically choose to trust it won't be so frightful then. I imagine myself smiling down from the clouds like those happy crayon angels, free of the broken baggage I'll leave scattered here below.

This essay by Kim Webb Reid won first place in the 2017 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.