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Kate Gale

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*Kate Gale*

## MY RAPIST IS ON THE PLANE

"My rapist is on this plane," the woman said. I paused. We'd been talking casually as you do with a seatmate you will never see again. I like to work on planes; I read student work or manuscripts, but this flight was only three hours, and the plane was small, so I didn't have room for my laptop and there were no movies. I was tired and ready to be home. The plane had the aisle and two seats on each side. The woman beside me and I were tight together, and we'd struck up a conversation as soon as we buckled in first about the cities, we live in. I live in Los Angeles, and she lives in Omaha, where she says the Jewish population is small, her synagogue tiny. We talked about Bar Mitzvahs, the big showy parties of the West Coast, and she said that in the Midwest they don't feel the same need to show off. We hadn't shown pictures of our kids, but when she'd asked if my daughter was dating any guys I liked, I said, "My daughter is engaged to a woman," and she said,

"My daughter is gay too. Doesn't everyone have a gay kid. Is it really possible only ten percent of the country is gay? It feels like everyone is gay except me, and I wish I were." And then she paused and looked blank, and said, "My rapist is on this plane."

"How old were you when this happened?" I asked.

"Ten years ago," she said. "I had just started dating after the divorce. And the guy, Brad, is a well-known banker in Omaha, my father banks with him, so I couldn't go to the police or do anything. The next day, he called me and asked for a second date. And I said, you raped me. He'd held me down on the floor. And he said, 'oh, right, yes, I forgot,' and

then he hung up, and the next day, he called a friend of mine and told her about it. She called me and said, 'Brad said he raped you, are you okay?' and I just said, 'I guess.' Because what else could I say."

I was sitting on the plane, drinking coffee. Before I'd gotten on this plane, I'd visited a friend who had offered me food to take. I wanted to say yes, give me some fruit because I like fruit on planes, but I didn't want to seem rude or greedy. My friend had been so generous, letting me swim in her pool, making me toast. Suddenly sitting there with Carrie sipping the coffee, I felt a rush of gratitude that I wasn't eating a peach or a tangerine which would have seemed horribly out of place in the dark of the moment.

I'm not a therapist. Not even close. I'm a trauma survivor myself, a person with no tears and a blanket of anxiety that I carry close. I didn't know what to say to the woman whose rapist was on the plane. "Did you ever tell your father?" I asked.

"That's the worst part," she said. "I didn't tell him until this year. We were having an argument about Roe V. Wade, and he said that women don't know how to control their bodies. Then he asked if I'd ever been raped, and I told him what happened. He just got off the phone. He didn't want to hear about it."

I didn't know her well enough to hug her or touch her. I didn't know why she was telling me this or what she wanted. She went on to say that she was going to a concert at the Troubadour in LA for a band we both liked. She seemed to be trying to pull herself out of the conversation. She said Brad was traveling with his wife. She asked for pretzels and ate them slowly one by one.

In Hawaii, years ago, our family went to South Point to cliff dive. There's always a debate as to whether it's fifty or sixty feet. My son and daughter jumped over and over with my son's friend Jason. Jason dove off the cliff and then did it

again feet first. I jumped once just so they wouldn't say I was a coward. Jason backpacked around Laos and Cambodia with my son when they were fresh out of high school; they took their guitars and played in tiny towns all the rock and roll they knew.

When they met, my ex-husband wanted to end the relationship. "This is bad for Michael," he said. The first time he met Jason, he was trying to shoot vodka into his arm with a needle. The second time he came over, he drank half a bottle of Hennessy and my ex found him in a pool of vomit, his head in a trash can, naked. Jason loved to be naked. Everyone got to see him naked. He moved in with us in high school, and he walked around the house, naked, the back yard naked. When he was arrested for shoplifting at Target he stripped down in the cop car, "so the cop can see the goods." When he was in a band with my son and they played at the Whiskey, he wore threadbare boxers. Jason moved to San Francisco so he could take part in the Folsom Street Fair each year. He loved the cock rings and the bare asses. He and my son spent a month of every year together finishing each other's sentences, recording songs.

Just before this trip, Jason had taken some pills at a party that had fentanyl. He never woke up. My son, Michael called me just before I boarded the plane. That day was the viewing and the funeral. My son couldn't get out whole sentences. Jason's face at thirty, the curls around his face, lying still. And then, carrying the coffin, each family member, and Michael was counted in that number putting in a shovel of earth, the dirt hitting the coffin. Jason gone.

I had tried to console my son, to find words. And then I'd boarded this plane and was sitting next to this woman and found myself once again searching my picnic basket of longing for words. When we parted at the end of the plane ride, she said, she wanted to see me again, and I gave her my card.

That night at my house, my son and daughter were still

out when I arrived home. But after I'd gone to bed, I heard them in the back yard, the slow thrum of my son's guitar singing, "Stairway to Heaven," and I thought how I wanted to tell Jason that in the afterlife you get just the amount of attention you need, no more, no less. You are listened to just the way you want to be heard. The stranger on the plane to whom you tell the story of the rapist, is the perfect stranger. If you take off your clothes, you suddenly find that no one else is wearing anything at all. I sat in bed and wanted to tell Jason and Carrie that they were blessed and loved even though Jason's father never liked him, and Carrie's father couldn't hear her.

I looked out the window, and my daughter had climbed the orange tree, and was sitting in the branches very still. I could smell the weed floating up from the yard and hear the guitar. If Jason were here, he'd be singing, his voice, very high and clear.

Carrie was going to hear Airborne Toxic Event. "Do you know where their name came from?" she asked me.

"Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," I said.

"I never read the book," she said. "I like easy reading."

"It's not for the faint of heart," I said. "It's about death and fear of death and of course, an airborne toxic event."

"I don't know how we move on," she said. The plane was coming down by that time and the horizon was splitting the sun in two pieces. One half of the sun lying fat and orange on the skyline, the other already gone. "This sunset," she said. "I want a picture. Get one for me." I snapped with her phone. "How do you think we move on?" she said. "I've tried to date since. But it's hard to trust anyone. It's awkward if you've got your friends on speed dial during the date. If you're positioned to fight while you make love. I never put down my guard. I don't know if I'll ever fall in love." I thought of my son's voice on the phone before takeoff. Frozen. Coiled.

"Do you think God hears us?" Carrie said to me.

"I'm not sure," I said. "I think God's hoping we're listening to each other."

We get a fistful of darkness, and we try to turn it into light.  
The sun disappears. The plane lands. Carrie vanishes into the  
crowd. My husband is waiting for me in the crash of noise  
that is LAX when I exit the airport.