Opening Extract from...

DEAR EDWARD

Written by **Ann Napolitano**

Published By **Viking Books, an imprint of Penguin**

1.

"Since death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?"

—Pema Chödrön

June 12, 2013

7:45 A.M.

Newark Airport is shiny from a recent renovation. There are potted plants at each joint of the security line, to keep passengers from realizing how long they'll have to wait. People prop themselves against walls or sit on suitcases. They all woke up before dawn; they exhale loudly, sputtering with exhaustion.

When the Adler family reaches the front of the line, they load their computers and shoes into trays. Bruce Adler removes his belt, rolls it up, and slots it neatly beside his brown loafers in a gray plastic bin. His sons are messier, throwing sneakers on top of laptops and wallets. Laces hang over the side of their shared tray, and Bruce can't stop himself from tucking the loose strands inside.

The large rectangular sign beside them reads: *All wallets, keys, phones, jewelry, electronic devices, computers, tablets, metal objects, shoes, belts, and food must go into the security bins. All drink and contraband must be thrown away.*

Bruce and Jane Adler flank their twelve-year-old son, Eddie, as they approach the screening machine. Their fifteen-year-old son, Jordan, hangs back until his family has gone through.

Jordan says to the officer manning the machine: "I want to opt out."

The officer gives him a look. "What'd you say?"

The boy shoves his hands in his pockets and says, "I want to opt out of going through the machine."

The officer yells, apparently to the room at large: "We've got a male O-P-T!"

"Jordan," his father says, from the far side of the tunnel. "What are you doing?"

The boy shrugs. "This is a full-body backscatter, Dad. It's the most dangerous and least effective screening machine on the market. I've read about it and I'm not going through it."

Bruce, who is ten yards away and knows he won't be allowed to go back through the scanner to join his son, shuts his mouth. He doesn't want Jordan to say another word.

"Step to the side, kid," the officer says. "You're holding up traffic."

After the boy has complied, the officer says, "Let me tell you, it's a whole lot easier and more pleasant to go through this machine than to have that guy over there pat you down. Those pat-downs are *thorough,* if you know what I mean."

The boy pushes hair off his forehead. He's grown six inches in the last year and is whippet thin. Like his mother and brother, he has curly hair that grows so quickly he can't keep it in check. His father's hair is short and white. The white arrived when Bruce was twenty-seven, the same year Jordan was born. Bruce likes to point at his head and say to his son, *Look what you did to me.* The boy is aware that his father is staring intently at him now, as if trying to deliver good sense through the air.

Jordan says, "There are four reasons I'm not going through this machine. Would you like to hear them?"

The security officer looks amused. He's not the only one paying attention to the boy now; the passengers around him are all listening.

"Oh God," Bruce says, under his breath.

Eddie Adler slips his hand into his mother's, for the first time in at least a year. Watching his parents pack for this move from New York to Los Angeles—*the Grand Upheaval,* his father called it—gave him an upset stomach. He feels his insides grumble now and wonders if there's a bathroom nearby. He says, "We should have stayed with him."

"He'll be okay," Jane says, as much to herself as to her son. Her husband's gaze is fixed on Jordan, but she can't bear to look. Instead, she focuses on the tactile pleasure of her child's hand in hers. She has missed this. *So much could be solved,* she thinks, *if we simply held hands with each other more often.*

The officer puffs out his chest. "Hit me, kid."

Jordan raises his fingers, ready to count. "One, I prefer to limit my exposure to radiation. Two, I don't believe this technology prevents terrorism. Three, I'm grossed out that the government wants to take pictures of my balls. And four"—he takes a breath—"I think the pose the person is forced to take inside the machine—hands up, like they're being mugged—is designed to make them feel powerless and degraded."

The TSA agent is no longer smiling. He glances around. He's not sure if this boy is making a fool of him.

Crispin Cox is in a wheelchair parked nearby, waiting for security to swab his chair for explosives. The old man has been stewing about this. Swab his wheelchair for explosives! If he had any spare breath in his lungs at all, he would refuse. Who do these idiots think they are? Who do they think he is? Isn't it bad enough

that he has to sit in this chair and travel with a nurse? He growls, "Give the boy his goddamn pat-down."

The old man has been issuing demands for decades and is almost never disobeyed. The tenor of his voice breaks the agent's indecision like a black belt's hand through a board. He points Jordan toward another officer, who tells him to spread his legs and stick out his arms. His family watches in dismay as the man moves his hand roughly between the boy's legs.

"How old are you?" the officer asks, when he pauses to readjust his rubber gloves.

"Fifteen."

He makes a sour face. "Hardly ever get kids doing this."

"Who do you get?"

"Hippies, mostly." He thinks for a moment. "Or people who used to be hippies."

Jordan has to force his body to be still. The agent is feeling along the waistline of his jeans, and it tickles. "Maybe I'll be a hippie when I grow up."

"I'm finished, fifteen," the man says. "Get out of here."

Jordan is smiling when he rejoins his family. He takes his sneakers from his brother. "Let's get going," Jordan says. "We don't want to miss our flight."

"We'll talk about that later," Bruce says.

The two boys lead the way down the hall. There are windows in this corridor, and the skyscrapers of New York City are visible in the distance—man-made mountains of steel and glass piercing a blue sky. Jane and Bruce can't help but locate the spot where the Twin Towers used to be, the same way the tongue finds the hole where a tooth was pulled. Their sons, who were both toddlers when the towers fell, accept the skyline as it is.

"Eddie," Jordan says, and the two boys exchange a look.

The brothers are able to read each other effortlessly; their parents are often mystified to find that Jordan and Eddie have conducted an entire conversation and come to a decision without words. They've always operated as a unit and done everything together. In the last year, though, Jordan has been pulling away. The way he says his brother's name now means: *I'm still here. I'll always come back.*

Eddie punches his brother in the arm and runs ahead.

Jane walks gingerly. The hand dropped by her younger son tingles at her side.

At the gate, there is more waiting to do. Linda Stollen, a young woman dressed all in white, hurries into a pharmacy. Her palms are sweaty, and her heart thumps like it's hoping to find a way out. Her flight from Chicago arrived at midnight, and she'd spent the intervening hours on a bench, trying to doze upright, her purse cradled to her chest. She'd booked the cheapest flight possible—hence the detour to Newark—and informed her father on the way to the airport that she would never ask him for money again. He had guffawed, even slapped his knee, like she'd just told the funniest joke he'd ever heard. She was serious, though. At this moment, she knows two things: One, she will never return to Indiana, and two, she will never ask her father and his third wife for anything, ever again.

This is Linda's second pharmacy visit in twenty-four hours. She reaches into her purse and touches the wrapper of the pregnancy test she bought in South Bend. This time, she chooses a celebrity magazine, a bag of chocolate candies, and a diet soda and carries them to the cashier.

Crispin Cox snores in his wheelchair, his body a gaunt origami

of skin and bones. Occasionally, his fingers flutter, like small birds struggling to take flight. His nurse, a middle-aged woman with bushy eyebrows, files her fingernails in a seat nearby.

Jane and Bruce sit side by side in blue airport chairs and argue, although no one around them would suspect it. Their faces are unflustered, their voices low. Their sons call this style of parental fight "DEFCON 4," and it doesn't worry them. Their parents are sparring, but it's more about communication than combat. They are reaching out, not striking.

Bruce says, "That was a dangerous situation."

Jane shakes her head slightly. "Jordan is a kid. They wouldn't have done anything to him. He was within his rights."

"You're being naïve. He was mouthing off, and this country doesn't take kindly to that, regardless of what the Constitution claims."

"You taught him to speak up."

Bruce tightens his lips. He wants to argue, but he can't. He homeschools the boys and has always emphasized critical thinking in their curriculum. He recalls a recent rant about the importance of not taking rules at face value. *Question everything,* he'd said. *Everything*. He'd spent weeks obsessing over the idiocy of the blowhards at Columbia for denying him tenure because he didn't go to their cocktail parties. He'd asked the head of the department: *What the hell does boozy repartee have to do with mathematics?* He wants his sons to question blowhards too, but not yet. He should have amended the declaration to: *Question everything, once you're grown up and in full command of your powers and no longer living at home, so I don't have to watch and worry*.

"Look at that woman over there," Jane says. "There are bells sewn into the hem of her skirt. Can you imagine wearing something that makes a jingly sound every time you move?" She shakes her head with what she expects to be mockery, but turns out to

be admiration. She imagines walking amid the tinkle of tiny bells. Making music, and drawing attention, with each step. The idea makes her blush. She's wearing jeans and what she thinks of as her "writing sweater." She dressed this morning for comfort. What did that woman dress for?

The fear and embarrassment that crackled through Bruce's body next to the screening machine begins to dissipate. He rubs his temples and offers up a Jewish-atheist prayer of gratitude for the fact that he didn't develop one of his headaches that make all twenty-two bones in his skull throb. When his doctor asked if he knew what triggered his migraines, Bruce had snorted. The answer was so clear and obvious: his sons. Fatherhood is, for him, one jolt of terror after another. When the boys were babies, Jane used to say that he carried them like live grenades. As far as he's concerned they were, and still are. The main reason he agreed to move to L.A. is because the movie studio is renting them a house with a yard. Bruce plans to place his grenades within that enclosure, and if they want to go anywhere, they'll need him to drive them. In New York, they could simply get in the elevator and be gone.

He checks on them now. They're reading on the far side of the room, as an act of mild independence. His youngest checks on him at the same time. Eddie is a worrier too. They exchange a glance, two different versions of the same face. Bruce forces a wide smile, to try to elicit the same from his son. He feels a sudden longing to see the boy happy.

The woman with the noisy skirt walks between the father and son, cutting off the connection. Her bells chime with each step. She is tall, Filipino, and solidly built. Tiny beads decorate her dark hair. She's singing to herself. The words are faint, but she drops them around the waiting room like flower petals: *Glory, Grace, Hallelujah, Love*.

A black soldier in uniform is standing by the window, with his back to the room. He's six foot five and as wide as a chest of drawers. Benjamin Stillman takes up space even in a room with plenty to spare. He's listening to the singer; the woman's voice reminds him of his grandmother. He knows that, like the screening machine, his grandmother will see through him the minute she lays eyes on him at LAX. She'll see what happened during the fight with Gavin; she'll see the bullet that punctured his side two weeks later, and the colostomy bag that blocks that hole now. In front of her—even though Benjamin is trained at subterfuge and has spent his entire life hiding truths from everyone, including himself—the game will be up. Right now, though, he finds peace in the fragments of a song.

An airline employee sashays to the mouth of the waiting room with a microphone. She stands with her hips pushed to one side. The uniform looks either baggy or too tight on the other gate agents, but hers fits as if it were custom made. Her hair is smoothed back into a neat bun, and her lipstick is shiny and red.

Mark Lassio, who has been texting instructions to his associate, looks up. He is thirty-two and has had two profiles written on him in *Forbes* magazine during the last three years. He has a hard chin, blue eyes that have mastered the art of the glare, and short gelled hair. His suit is matte gray, a color that looks understated yet expensive. Mark sizes up the woman and feels his brain begin to turn like a paddle wheel, spinning off last night's whiskey sours. He straightens in his chair and gives her his full attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she says, "welcome to Flight 2977 to Los Angeles. We are ready to board."

The plane is an Airbus A321, a white whale with a blue stripe down the side. It seats 187 passengers and is arranged around a

center aisle. In first class, there are two spacious seats on either side of the aisle; in economy, there are three seats per side. Every seat on this flight has been sold.

Passengers file on slowly; small bags filled with items too precious or essential to check with their luggage thump against their knees. The first thing they notice upon entering the plane is the temperature. The space has the chill of a meat locker, and the air-conditioning vents issue a continuous, judgmental *shhhh!* Arms that arrived bare now have goosebumps and are soon covered with sweaters.

Crispin's nurse fusses over him as he moves from the wheelchair into a first-class seat. He's awake now, and his irritation is at full throttle. One of the worst things about being sick is that it gives people—*goddamn strangers*—full clearance to touch him. The nurse reaches out to wrap her hands around his thigh, to adjust his position. *His thigh!* His legs once strode across boardrooms, covered the squash court at the club, and carved down black diamonds at Jackson Hole. Now a woman he considers at best mediocre thinks she can gird them with her palms. He waves her off. "I don't require assistance," he says, "to sit down in a lousy seat."

Benjamin boards the plane with his head down. He flew to New York on a military aircraft, so this is his first commercial flight in over a year. He knows what to expect, though, and is uncomfortable. In 2002, he would have been automatically upgraded from economy to first class, and the entire plane would have applauded at the sight of him. Now one passenger starts to clap, then another joins in, then a few more. The clapping skips like a stone across a lake, touching down here and there, before sinking below the inky surface into quiet. The noise, while it lasts, is skittish, with undertones of embarrassment. "Thank you for your service," a young woman whispers. The soldier lifts his hand in a soft salute and drops into his economy seat.

The Adler family unknots near the door. Jane waves to her sons and husband, who are right in front of her, and then, shoulders bunched, hurries into first class. Bruce looks after his wife for a moment, then directs the gangly limbs of Jordan and Eddie into the back of the plane. He peers at the seat numbers they pass and calculates that they will be twenty-nine rows from Jane, who had previously promised to downgrade her ticket to sit with them. Bruce has come to realize that her promises, when related to work, mean very little. Still, he chooses to believe her every time, and thus chooses to be disappointed.

"Which row, Dad?" Eddie says.

"Thirty-one."

Passengers unpack snacks and books and tuck them into the seat pockets in front of them. The back section of the plane smells of Indian food. The home cooks, including Bruce, sniff the air and think: *cumin*. Jordan and Eddie argue over who gets the window seat—their father claims the aisle for legroom—until the older boy realizes they're keeping other passengers from getting to their seats and abruptly gives in. He regrets this act of maturity the moment he sits down; he now feels trapped between his father and brother. The elation—*the power*—he felt after the pat-down has been squashed. He had, for a few minutes, felt like a fully realized adult. Now he feels like a dumb kid buckled into a high chair. Jordan resolves not to speak to Eddie for at least an hour, to punish him.

"Dad," Eddie says, "will all our stuff be in the new house when we get there?"

Bruce wonders what Eddie is specifically worried about: his beanbag chair, his piano music, the stuffed elephant that he still sleeps with on occasion? His sons have lived in the New York apartment for their entire lives. That apartment has now been rented; if Jane is successful and they decide to stay on the West

Coast, it will be sold. "Our boxes arrive next week," Bruce says. "The house is furnished, though, so we'll be fine until then."

The boy, who looks younger than his twelve years, nods at the oval window beside him. His fingertips press white against the clear plastic.

Linda Stollen shivers in her white jeans and thin shirt. The woman seated to her right seems, impossibly, to already be asleep. She has draped a blue scarf across her face and is leaning against the window. Linda is fishing in the seat-back pocket, hoping to find a complimentary blanket, when the woman with the musical skirt steps into her row. The woman is so large that when she settles into the aisle seat, she spills over the armrest into Linda's personal space.

"Good morning, sweetheart," the woman says. "I'm Florida."

Linda pulls her elbows in close to her sides, to avoid contact. "Like the state?"

"Not like the state. I *am* the state. I'm Florida."

Oh my God, Linda thinks. *This flight is six hours long. I'm going to have to pretend to be asleep the whole way.*

"What's your name, darling?"

Linda hesitates. This is an unanticipated opportunity to kick-start her new self. She plans to introduce herself to strangers in California as *Belinda*. It's part of her fresh beginning: an improved version of herself, with an improved name. Belinda, she has decided, is an alluring woman who radiates confidence. Linda is an insecure housewife with fat ankles. Linda curls her tongue inside her mouth in preparation. *Be-lin-da.* But her mouth won't utter the syllables. She coughs and hears herself say, "I'm getting married. I'm going to California so my boyfriend can propose. He's going to propose."

"Well," Florida says, in a mild tone, "isn't that something."

"Yes," Linda says. "Yes. I suppose it is." This is when she realizes how tired she is and how little she slept last night. The word *suppose* sounds ridiculous coming out of her mouth. She wonders if this is the first time she's ever used it in a sentence.

Florida bends down to rearrange items in her gargantuan canvas bag. "I've been married a handful of times myself," she says. "Maybe more than a handful."

Linda's father has been married three times, her mother twice. Handfuls of marriages make sense to her, though she intends to marry only once. She intends to be different from everyone else in the Stollen line. To be better.

"If you get hungry, darling, I have plenty of snacks. I refuse to touch that foul airplane food. If you can even call it food."

Linda's stomach grumbles. When did she last eat a proper meal? Yesterday? She stares at her bag of chocolate candies, peeking forlornly out of the seat-back pocket. With an urgency that surprises her, she grabs the bag, rips it open, and tips it into her mouth.

"You didn't tell me your name," Florida says.

She pauses between chews. "Linda."

The flight attendant—the same woman who welcomed them at the gate—saunters down the center aisle, checking overhead compartments and seatbelts. She seems to move to an internal soundtrack; she slows down, smiles, then changes tempo. Both men and women watch her; the swishy walk is magnetic. The flight attendant is clearly accustomed to the attention. She sticks her tongue out at a baby seated on her mother's lap, and the infant gurgles. She pauses by Benjamin Stillman's aisle seat, crouches down, and whispers in his ear: "I've been alerted to your medical issue, because I'm the chief attendant on this flight. If you need any assistance at any point, please don't hesitate to ask."

The soldier is startled; he'd been staring out the window at the mix of grays on the horizon. Planes, runways, the distant jagged city, a highway, whizzing cars. He meets her eyes—realizing, as he does so, that he has avoided all eye contact for days, maybe even weeks. Her eyes are honey-colored; they go deep, and are nice to look into. Benjamin nods, shaken, and forces himself to turn away. "Thank you."

In first class, Mark Lassio has arranged his seat area with precision. His laptop, a mystery novel, and a bottle of water are in the seat-back pocket. His phone is in his hand; his shoes are off and tucked beneath the seat. His briefcase, laid flat in the overhead compartment, contains office paperwork, his three best pens, caffeine pills, and a bag of almonds. He's on his way to California to close a major deal, one he's been working on for months. He glances over his shoulder, trying to appear casual. He's never been good at casual, though. He's a man who looks best in a three-thousand-dollar suit. He peers at the curtain that separates first class and economy with the same intensity he brings to his workouts, his romantic dinners, and his business presentations. His nickname at the office is the Hammer.

The flight attendant draws his attention for obvious reasons, but there's more to it than sheer beauty. She's that magic, shimmery age—he guesses twenty-seven—when a woman has one foot in youth and one in adulthood. She is somehow both a smooth-skinned sixteen-year-old girl and a knowing forty-year-old woman in the same infinite, blooming moment. And this particular woman is alive like a house on fire. Mark hasn't seen anyone this packed with cells and genes and *biology* in a long time, perhaps ever. She's full of the same stuff as the rest of them, but she's turned everything *on*.

When the flight attendant finally steps into first class, Mark has the urge to unbuckle his seatbelt, grab her left hand with his

right, wrap his other arm around her waist, and start to salsa. He doesn't know how to salsa, but he's pretty sure that physical contact with her would resolve the issue. She is a Broadway musical made flesh, whereas he, he realizes suddenly, is running on nothing but alcohol fumes and pretzels. He looks down at his hands, abruptly deflated. The idea of clasping her waist and starting to dance is not impossible to him. He's done that kind of thing before; his therapist calls them "flare-ups." He hasn't had a flare-up in months, though. He's sworn them off.

When he looks back up, the flight attendant is at the front of the plane, poised to announce the safety instructions. Just to keep her in their eyeline, many passengers lean into the aisle, surprised to find themselves paying attention for the first time in years.

"Ladies and gentlemen," her voice curves through the air, "my name is Veronica, and I am the chief flight attendant. You can find me in first class, and my colleagues Ellen and Luis"—she gestures at a dimmer version of herself (lighter-brown hair, paler skin) and a bald, short man—"will be in economy. On behalf of the captain and the entire crew, welcome aboard. At this time, I ask that you please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their full upright position. Also, as of this moment, any electronic equipment must be turned off. We *appreciate* your cooperation."

Mark obediently powers off his phone. Usually he just tucks it in his pocket. He feels the sonorous welling in his chest that accompanies doing something for someone else.

Jane Adler, sitting beside him, watches the enraptured passengers with amusement. She was, she figures, actively cute for a few years in her twenties, which was when she met Bruce, but she's never come close to wielding Veronica's brand of sex appeal. The flight attendant is now showing the passengers how to buckle a

seatbelt, and the Wall Street guy is acting like he's never heard of a seatbelt before, much less how to operate one.

"There are several emergency exits on this aircraft," Veronica tells them. "Please take a few moments now to locate the one nearest to you. If we need to evacuate the aircraft, floor-level lighting will illuminate and guide you toward the exits. Doors can be opened by moving the handle in the direction of the arrow. Each door is equipped with an inflatable slide, which may also be detached and used as a life raft."

Jane knows that her husband, somewhere behind her, has already mapped out the exits and chosen which one to push the boys toward in case of an emergency. She can also sense his dismissive eye roll during the comment about inflatable slides. Bruce processes the world—and decides what's true—based on numbers, and statistically no one has ever survived a plane crash by using an inflatable slide. They are simply a fairy tale intended to give passengers a false sense of control. Bruce has no use for fairy tales, but most people seem to like them.

Crispin wonders why he never married a woman with a body like this flight attendant's. None of his wives had an ass to speak of. *Maybe skinny girls are a young man's game,* he thinks, *and it takes years to appreciate the value of a cushion in your bed*. He's not attracted to this woman; she's the age of a couple of his grandchildren, and he has no more fire in his loins. The very idea of two people writhing around in a bed seems like a distasteful joke. It's a joke he spent a lot of time cracking himself, of course, when he was a younger man. He realizes—gripping the arms of his chair as hot pain blinks on and off in his midsection—that all the major chapters in his personal life started and ended on wrinkled bedsheets. All the wives, the would-be wives, the ex-wives, negotiated their terms in the bedroom.

I get the kids.

We'll be married in June at the country club.

I'll keep the summer house.

Pay my bills, or I'll tell your wife.

He peers at Veronica, who is now explaining how a life vest can be inflated by blowing through a straw. *Maybe if the women I chose had a little more heft,* he thinks, *they would have stuck around longer.*

"We remind you," the flight attendant says, with a slow smile, "that this is a nonsmoking flight. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask one of our crew members. On behalf of Trinity Airlines, *I*"—she lingers on the word, sending it out like a soap bubble into the air—"wish you an enjoyable flight."

Veronica steps out of view then, and, without a focal point, the passengers pick up books or magazines. Some close their eyes. The vents hiss louder. Partly because the sound comes from above, and partly because it is combined with blasts of icy air, the hiss makes people uncomfortable.

Jane Adler pulls her sweater tighter to fight off the cold and nestles into her guilt for not finishing the script before this flight. She hates to fly, and now she has to fly apart from her family. *It's punishment,* she thinks. *For my laziness, for my avoidance, for my taking on this crazy assignment in the first place.* She had written for a television series in New York for so long, partly because it involved no travel. But here she is, taking another chance, another job, and another plane ride.

She follows her thoughts down a familiar path; when she's anxious, she replays moments from her life, perhaps to convince herself that she has a history. She has created memories, which means she will create more. She and her sister run on a flat Canadian beach; she silently, amicably, splits the newspaper with her father at the kitchen table; she pees in a public park after drinking

too much champagne at a college formal; she watches Bruce, his face wrinkled in thought on a street corner in the West Village; she gives birth to her youngest son without drugs, in a hot tub, amazed at the bovine noises rising from her lungs. There's the stack of her seven favorite novels that she's been curating since childhood, and her best friend, Tilly, and the dress she wears to all important meetings because it makes her feel both pulled together and thin. The way her grandmother puckered her lips, and blew air kisses, and sang greetings: *Hello, hello!*

Jane tills through the inane and the meaningful, trying to distract herself from both where she is and where she's going. Her fingers automatically find the spot below her collarbone where her comet-shaped birthmark lives, and she presses down. This has been a habit since childhood. She presses as if to make a connection with her real, true self. She presses until it hurts.

Crispin Cox looks out the window. The doctors in New York—the best doctors in New York, and doesn't that mean the world?—assured him that it was worth undergoing treatment at a specialized hospital in L.A. *They know this cancer inside out,* the New York doctors told him. *We'll get you on the drug trial.* There was a light in the doctors' eyes that Crispin recognized. They didn't want him to die, to be beaten, because that would mean that they, one day, would be beaten too. *When you're great, you fight. You don't go down. You burn like a motherfucking fire.* Crispin had nodded, because of course he was going to beat this ridiculous disease. Of course this wasn't going to take him down. But a month ago, he'd caught a virus that both sapped his energy and soaked him with worry. A new voice entered his head, one that forecast doom and made him question his prior confidence. The virus passed, but the anxiety didn't. He'd barely left his apartment since then. When his doctor called to make a final preflight appointment to do more blood work, Crispin said he was too busy.

The truth was that he was scared the blood work would reflect the way he now felt. His only concession to this new, unwelcome unease was hiring a nurse for the flight. He didn't like the idea of being alone in the sky.

Bruce Adler looks at his boys; their faces are unreadable. He has the familiar thought that he is too old and out of touch to decipher them. A few days earlier, while waiting for a table at their favorite Chinese restaurant, Bruce watched Jordan notice a girl his age walk in with her family. The two teens regarded each other for a moment, heads tipped to the side, and then Jordan's face opened—it might as well have split in half—with a grin. He offered this stranger what looked like everything: his joy, his love, his brain, his complete attention. He gave that girl a face that Bruce, who has studied his son every single day of his life, had never seen. Never even knew existed.

Benjamin shifts in his cramped seat. He wishes he were in the cockpit, behind the sealed door. Pilots speak like military men, in a scripted code, with brisk precision. A few minutes of listening to them prepare for takeoff would allow his chest to unclench. He doesn't like the combination of chitchat and snores going on around him. There's a messiness to how civilians behave that bothers him. The white lady next to him smells of eggs, and she's asked him twice whether he was in Iraq or "that other place."

Linda finds herself engaged in a strange and exhausting abdominal exercise as she tries to steer away from the wide mass of Florida without touching the sleeping passenger on her other side. She feels like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. She wishes—her obliques engaged—that she had bought more chocolate. She thinks, *In California, with Gary, I will eat more,* and she's cheered by the thought. She's dieted since the age of twelve; she never considered lifting that yoke until this moment. Thinness has al-

ways seemed essential to her, but what if it's not? She tries to imagine herself as voluptuous, sexy.

Florida is singing again but from so deep within her chest, and at such a low volume, that the noise comes out like a hum. Around her, as if cued by the sound, the plane's engine thrums to life. The entry door is vacuum-sealed shut. The aircraft shudders and lurches, while Florida murmurs. She is a fountain of melodies, dousing everyone in her vicinity. Linda grips her hands in her lap. Jordan and Eddie, despite their silent feud, touch shoulders for comfort as the plane builds speed. The passengers holding books or magazines aren't actually reading anymore. Those with their eyes closed aren't sleeping. Everyone is conscious, as the plane lifts off the ground.

June 12, 2013

Evening

The National Transportation Safety Board's "Go-Team" is at the site seven hours after the accident—the length of time it takes them to fly from D.C. to Denver and then drive rental cars to the small town in the flatlands of northern Colorado. Because of the long summer daylight, it's not yet dark when they arrive. Their real work will take place at sunrise the following day. They are here now to get a sense of the scene, to simply begin.

The town's mayor is there, to greet the NTSB lead investigator. They pose for a photograph for the media. Except for the handshake, the mayor—who is also a bookkeeper, because this town can't afford full-time employees—tucks his hands in his pockets to hide the fact that they're trembling.

The police have cordoned off the area; the NTSB team, wearing protective orange suits and face masks, climbs over and around the wreckage. The land is level in every direction, the surface burned, charred, a piece of toast blackened under a broiler. The

fire is out, but the air is charged with heat. The plane sluiced through a cluster of trees and dug itself into the earth. The good news, the members of the team tell one another, is that it wasn't in a residential area. No humans on the ground were hurt. They find two mangled cows and a dead bird among the chairs, luggage, metal, and limbs.

Families of the victims arrive in Denver by plane and car over the twenty-four hours following the event. The downtown Marriott has several floors reserved for them. At 5:00 P.M. on June 13, the NTSB spokesman, a man with acne-scarred skin and a gentle demeanor, gives an update to the families and media in the hotel banquet hall.

Family members perch on folding chairs. They lean forward as if the skin on their shoulders can hear; they bow their heads as if hair follicles might pick up what no other part of their body can. Pores are open, fingers spread. They listen fiercely, hoping that a better, less crushing truth exists beneath the facts being delivered.

There is a cluster of elaborate flower arrangements in the back corner of the room, which no one looks at. Red and pink peonies in giant vases. A cascade of white lilies. They are left over from a wedding held in the room the night before. This smell will keep several family members out of flower shops for the rest of their lives.

The press stands apart at the briefing. They avoid eye contact with the relatives during interviews. They develop their own tics: One man scratches his arms as if he's been attacked by poison ivy; an on-air reporter fixes and re-fixes her hair. They disseminate the updates in live television interviews and through emailed AP reports. They focus on the "known" passengers. A plastics baron, famous for building an empire and automating thousands of em-

ployees out of work. A Wall Street wunderkind, worth an estimated 104 million dollars. A United States army officer, three college professors, a civil-rights activist, and a former writer for *Law & Order*. They pour facts into hungry mouths; this news story has captivated the world. Every corner of the Internet has weighed in.

A reporter holds up a copy of *The New York Times* to a camera, to show the huge block headline, the kind normally reserved for presidential elections and moonwalks. It reads: 191 DIE IN PLANE CRASH; 1 SURVIVOR.

The relatives have only one question when the press briefing comes to a close; they all lean toward it like a window in a dark room: "How is the boy?"

The intact pieces of the plane will be transported to the NTSB's facility in Virginia. They will put the puzzle back together there. Now they are looking for the black box. The woman who leads the team, a sixty-year-old legend in the field known simply as Donovan, is certain that they will find it.

For someone with her experience, the scene is uncomplicated. The debris is contained within a half-mile vicinity, and there are no bodies of water or swampy ground, just hard dirt and grass. Nothing can be permanently missing or lost; it is all within reach. There is charred metal, seats cracked down the middle, splinters of glass. There are pieces of bodies but no intact cadavers. It's easy to look past the human flesh and focus on the metal. Focus on the fact that this jigsaw puzzle makes sense. Donovan's team is made up of men and women who spend their professional lives waiting for tragedies to occur. They drive themselves hard, mouths drawn under masks, taking inventory and bagging evidence.

A few days later, the allotted rooms at the Marriott have emptied: The families have left. The daily updates to the press have stopped. The NTSB team has found the black box and returned to Virginia. It has been announced that they will release basic findings within three weeks and that there will be a public hearing on the evidence in Washington, D.C., in approximately six months.

The news coverage has broadened; several stories focus on the boy's aunt and uncle, who have flown in from New Jersey to adopt him. Lacey Curtis, thirty-nine, is Jane Adler's younger sister, and the boy's only remaining blood relative. There's a photo of a woman with light hair, freckles, and plump cheeks, smiling tentatively. The only other information known about her is that she's a housewife. Her husband, John Curtis, forty-one, is a computer scientist who does IT consulting for local businesses. They have no children.

Information about anything and anyone related to the crash continues to be inhaled, so television and Internet pundits continue to speculate. Were the pilots drunk? Did the plane malfunction? Is it 100 percent certain that this wasn't an act of terrorism? Did one of the passengers go crazy and rush the cockpit? Was it the rainstorm? Google analytics show that, one week after the accident, 53 percent of U.S. online searches are related to the crash. "Why is it," an old news anchor growls, "that out of all the terrible news in this terrible world, we care so much about this one downed plane and this one little boy?"

He's been in the hospital for a week. A woman on crutches enters the room; she's the head of public relations for the Denver hospi-

tal and has been appointed to update the family on everything that's not directly medical.

"Susan," John Curtis says in greeting. He's a tall, bearded man, with the pallor and potbelly befitting a person who spends most of his life in front of a computer screen.

"Has he spoken today?"

Lacey—pale, with a coffee stain on her blouse—shakes her head. "Not since we told him."

"Have you decided if you'd like us to refer to him as Eddie or Edward?" Susan asks.

John turns to his wife, and they share a look. The look—haggard and thready—suggests that they have not slept for more than an hour at a stretch since receiving the phone call. The plane had crashed in the middle of a week when Lacey and John were not speaking to each other, because she wanted to move on with their quest to have a baby and he did not. And now the fight and the silence feel irrelevant. They have been bucked off the horse that was their life. Their nephew is lying in front of them, broken, and he is their responsibility.

"This is for strangers, right?" Lacey says. "They don't know him, or us. The press should use his given name. Edward."

"Not Eddie," John says.

"Fine," Susan says.

Edward—for that's his name now—is sleeping, or pretending to sleep. The three adults look at him, as if for the first time. The bandage circles his forehead; thick moppish hair slips out beneath it. He has sheer white skin and dark circles beneath his eyes. He's lost weight and appears younger than twelve. There's purple bruising on his chest that flowers beyond the neckline of the loose hospital gown. Both of his legs are in casts, but his right one is raised in traction. His feet are covered in orange socks, bought in the hospital gift shop. White letters spell DENVER!!! on the soles.

There is a soft stuffed elephant beneath Edward's arm that Lacey finds difficult to look at. The moving company hired to transport the Adler family's belongings across the country stopped at a motel in Omaha the night after the crash. They emptied the truck in the parking lot, pulled every single box onto the asphalt. They opened the one that read EDDIE'S ROOM. They fished the stuffed elephant out of the box and mailed it to the Denver hospital with a note that said: *We thought the boy might want this*.

Susan says, "The plan is still to airlift him in two days, now that he's stable. A private plane has been donated for the trip, so you can both ride with him."

"Everyone is being so kind!" Lacey says, and then blushes. She has so many freckles that the blush simply serves to join them together. She has taken to wringing her freckled hands, as if the repeated motion might somehow change this unacceptable reality.

"A few other things," Susan says. She leans into her crutches. "Have you been online?"

"No," John says. "Not really."

"Well, just so you know, several Facebook pages have sprung up, devoted to either the flight or to Edward. There was also a Twitter account called @miracleboy, with Edward's face as the avatar, but that's been taken down."

John and Lacey blink at her.

"The content is mostly positive," Susan says. "Condolences, sympathy notes, that kind of thing. You've both been in the news some, because people were curious about who was taking Edward in. I just didn't want you to be surprised if you happened upon it."

"*Mostly* positive?" Lacey says.

"Trolls," John says.

"Trolls?" Lacey's eyes look impossibly wide.

"People who write provocative comments online, to try to get an emotional response," John says. "Their goal is to upset people. The more people they upset, the more successful their trolling is."

Lacey wrinkles her nose.

"It's considered an art form by some," John says.

Susan gives an almost inaudible sigh. "In case we don't have another chance to talk properly before you leave, I wanted to remind you about the personal-injury and aviation lawyers. They're going to land on you like vultures, I'm afraid. But they're not allowed to approach you until forty-five days after the crash. So please disregard, or sue, anyone who does. You know all the medical bills are being covered by the airline. There's no rush to settle. You'll get Social Security death benefits first, then life-insurance money, if either of Edward's parents had a policy. It will take time to sort out the rest, and I don't want you to let anyone convince you that any kind of legal action is urgent."

"Okay," Lacey says, but it's clear that she's not paying attention. The TV in the corner is on mute, but the bottom of the screen runs a banner reading, MIRACLE BOY BEING RELEASED TO HOSPITAL NEAR RELATIVES' HOME.

"People *can* be terrible," Susan says.

Edward shifts on the bed. He turns his head, exposing a smooth, bruised cheek.

"There are family members," she continues, "from the other passengers on the plane who wanted to see Edward, but we kept them away."

"Jesus," John says. "Why do they want to see him?"

Susan shrugs. "Maybe because Edward was the last one to see their loved ones alive."

John makes a small noise in his throat.

"I'm sorry," Susan says, her cheeks pinkening. "I should have phrased that differently."

Lacey sits down in one of the chairs next to the window. A beam of sunlight creates a halo effect around her exhausted face.

"One more thing," Susan says. "The president is going to call."

"The president?"

"*The* president. Of the United States."

John laughs, a quick burst into the particular air of this room. Charged air. Air that is waiting for the next word from the boy on the bed. Air that shushes everyone who enters, separating those who have lost from those who haven't.

Lacey puts her hands to her unwashed hair and John says, "He'll be on the phone, Lace. He won't be able to see you."

The nurses bustle the boy awake by drawing blood and taking vitals right around when the call is due to come in.

"I'm here," Lacey says. "So is Uncle John."

Edward's face contorts.

Lacey feels a shot of panic. *Is he in pain?* And then realizes what his face is trying to do. He's trying to smile, to please her.

"No, no," she whispers. Then, to the room at large: "Are we ready for the call?"

When she turns back, Edward has stopped trying.

A brand-new phone has been installed next to the bed, and Susan is there to press the speaker button.

"Edward?" The voice is deep; it fills the room.

The boy is horizontal on the bed, looking small and damaged to the grown-ups that surround him. "Yes, sir?"

"Young man . . ." The president pauses. "There's not much I or anyone else can say that will mean anything to you right now. I can only imagine what you're going through."

Edward's eyes are wide, flat.

"I wanted to tell you that the whole country is sorry for your

loss and that we're rooting for you to pull through this. We're rooting for you, son."

Lacey nudges Edward's arm, but Edward doesn't say a word.

The deep voice repeats the words, slower now, as if convinced that the repetition will make a difference. "The whole country is rooting for you."

Edward is silent on the plane ride to New Jersey. Silent in the ambulance, which has blacked-out windows to keep the press from snapping pictures of him. He speaks only when medically necessary for the remaining two weeks in the New Jersey hospital, as his lung mends and his leg comes out of traction.

"You're healing beautifully," a doctor says to Edward.

"I keep hearing a clicking sound."

The doctor's face changes; an invisible dial inside him spins and lands on the clinical setting. "How long have you been hearing it?"

The boy considers. "Since I woke up."

The neurologist is summoned. He orders new tests and an MRI of Edward's brain. He has white eyebrows and no other visible hair, and every day he cups Edward's face in his hand while he stares deep into his eyes, as if there's information there only he can read.

The neurologist calls Lacey and John into the hall. "The truth is," he says, "that if ten different people went through exactly the same trauma as this child—were banged around, pitched at a tremendous velocity, and then jolted to a stop—they would all have different symptoms." He raises his white eyebrows for emphasis. "Traumatic brain injury is invisible to most of our measuring tools, so I can't tell you with any certainty what Edward is going through or will go through in the future." He focuses his atten-

tion on Lacey. "Imagine I grabbed you by the shoulders and shook you as hard as I could. When I let go, you might not be technically injured—no muscles pulled, et cetera—but your body would feel the trauma. Right? That's how it is for Edward. He may have odd symptoms over the next few months, even years. Things like depression, anxiety, panic; his senses of balance, hearing, and smell may all be affected." The doctor glances at his watch. "Any questions?"

John and Lacey look at each other. Everything, including language, seems to have splintered and fallen apart at their feet. *Any questions?*

Finally, John says, "Not right now," and Lacey shakes her head.

The nurse wakes the boy up in the middle of the night to take his blood pressure and temperature. She says, "Are you okay?" The bald doctor always leads with, "How's the pain?" When his aunt arrives each morning, she smooths his hair off his forehead and says, in a low whisper, "How're you doing?"

Edward is unable to answer any of these questions. He can't consider how he's feeling; that door is far too dangerous to open. He tries to stay away from thoughts and emotions, as if they're furniture he can skirt past in a room. When the nurse leaves the TV on the cartoon channel, he watches it. His mouth is always dry, and the clicking in his ear comes and goes. Sometimes he is awake but not awake, and hours go by without him noticing. He'll have a breakfast tray across his lap, and then the light's fading outside.

He doesn't like his daily walk, which isn't actually a walk, since he's in a wheelchair. "You need a change of scenery," the nurse with dreadlocks tells him each weekday. The weekend nurse, who has blond hair so long it almost touches her bottom, doesn't

say anything. She just loads him into the wheelchair and pushes him into the hallway.

This is where the people wait. The hall is lined with them. Sick people, also in wheelchairs, or standing weakly in doorways. The nurses try to shoo them back into their rooms. "Don't clog the corridor," a male nurse shouts. "This is a fire hazard. Give the boy some space."

An old man makes the sign of the cross, and so does a dark-skinned woman with an IV in her arm. A redheaded teenager, the age of Jordan, nods at him, his eyes curious. So many eyes stare at Edward that the scene looks like a Picasso painting: hundreds of eyeballs, and then a smattering of limbs and hairstyles. An old woman reaches out to touch his hand as he passes. "God has blessed you."

The worst are the criers. Edward tries not to look, but their sobs thunder like organ notes and suck up the available air. It feels unkind that they are shoving their emotions at him when his own sadness and fear are so vast that he has to hide from them. The tears of these strangers sting against his raw skin. His ears click and people hold handkerchiefs to their mouths and then the nurse reaches the end of the corridor and the mechanical door slides open and they are outside. He looks down at his busted legs, to avoid seeing the lethal sky.

They release Edward from the hospital when he can bear weight on the less damaged leg and therefore use crutches. His head and ribs have healed, and the bruises on his chest and legs are yellow now instead of purple. The staff gather in his room to say goodbye, and it is only then that Edward realizes he doesn't know any of their names. They are wearing name tags on their chests, but it makes his head hurt to read. He wonders if this is another

symptom. Perhaps he will never put a name with a face ever again, and the only names he will know will be the ones he knew before the crash. This thought is oddly comforting, as he shakes hands with the bald doctor and the blond nurse and the one with the dreadlocks too.

He rises out of the wheelchair at the front door of the hospital and is handed crutches. He walks slowly to the car, between Lacey and John. He's conscious of his aunt and uncle's presence in a new way. The last time he saw them before this was at Christmastime, when they'd met for brunch at a restaurant in Manhattan. He remembers listening to his father and uncle discuss a new computer-programming language. He'd sat between his mother and Lacey and had been so bored that he built a house using his silverware and napkin. The women had skipped from one seemingly pointless conversation to the next: neighbors, the ice cream Lacey made once a year from an elusive Canadian berry, a handsome actor on his mom's television show.

If asked, Edward would have said that he loved his aunt and uncle, but it had always been clear that they weren't *for* him, or Jordan. The grown-ups got together for the grown-ups. The gatherings were designed to allow his mother and aunt to share a teary hug goodbye and promise into each other's hair: *We will see each other more often*. Edward can picture his brother across from him at that brunch, steepling his fingers and trying to weigh in on the technical conversation his dad and John were having, as if he were also a grown-up. The image of his brother is so painful that Edward's vision cuts out entirely for a second, and he stumbles.

"Steady," John says.

"Goodbye, Edward," voices say.

"Good luck, Edward."

A car door swings open in front of him. Only then does he see,

on the far side of the car, across the street, a small crowd of people. He wonders dimly why they're there. Then someone in the crowd calls Edward's name, and others clap and wave their arms when they see that they have his attention. He studies a posterboard held by a little girl. His head aches as he absorbs the words: *Stay Strong.* The sign beside it says in block letters: MIRACLE BOY!

"I don't know how they found out your release date," John says. "It wasn't in the papers."

Lacey rubs his arm, and since he is precariously balanced on his booted foot, this almost throws him over.

"It's like they think I'm famous."

"You are famous, kind of," John says.

"Let's leave," Lacey says.

They climb into the car and drive past the waving, posterbearing crowd. Edward stares at them through the window. He offers a small wave, and a man pumps the air with his fist, as if Edward's wave was what he'd been hoping for. The clicking noise starts up inside Edward then, a reminder of the staccato beat he used to time piano notes with. He sinks back into his seat and listens to his body. He can't remember being invaded with sounds like this ever before. Beneath the sharp clicks there is the thud—a blurrier, messier sound—of his own heart.

They drive toward a house Edward has visited sporadically over the course of his life, but always with his parents and brother. Now he's going to live there. How is that possible? He tries to recall the name of his aunt and uncle's town. He watches the cars and trees wash past the window. They seem to be driving too quickly, and he's about to say something when he spots a graveyard. For the first time, he wonders what happened to the bodies.

An icy sweat coats his skin. "Please pull over."

John swerves to the hard edge of the highway, and Edward pushes open his door, hangs his body out, and throws up onto

the gray dirt. Oatmeal and orange juice. Cars hurtle past. Lacey rubs his back. He pretends, as he does every time her face isn't directly in his line of vision, that she is his mom.

He can't stop vomiting; his body coils up, releases.

He hears her say, "I hated when the nurses told you that you were going to be okay." Lacey's voice is more strident than his mother's; she's his aunt again.

"You're not okay. Do you hear me, Edward? Are you listening? You are not okay. We are not okay. *This is not okay*."

His body has paused, and he's unsure whether the violence will continue. When he realizes he's done, that his body is scraped clean and pulsing with emptiness, he sits up. He nods his head. And somehow, that statement and that nod loosen and break apart the air between the three of them. There is a note of relief. They have somewhere to start, even if it is the worst place imaginable.

9:05 A.M.

The spiky buildings of Manhattan can be seen out the window, the raised right arm of the Statue of Liberty, the swipe of a bridge across the river. The passengers shift in their seats, searching for positions comfortable enough to occupy for six hours in the sky. Top buttons on shirts are undone. Shoes removed. Passengers with the gift of being able to fall asleep anywhere, anytime, do so now. There's no need for consciousness, after all. On the ground, people's bodies are utilized, but on a plane, a person's size, shape, and strength have no utility and are in fact an inconvenience. Everyone has to find a way to store themselves, in the most tolerable fashion possible, for the duration of the flight.

Florida peers past Linda and the sleeping woman with the blue scarf. She has a hunger to see the city before it disappears behind clouds. Different locations have different energies, and for her, New York is glittering eye shadow, Basquiat graffiti, and strangers with bold dreams. She sees herself dancing in bars, slow-walking

across cacophonous streets while men hoot at her womanly goods, wringing all the life she can out of her days in that snap-crackle-pop city.

Florida lived in New York during her twenties and early thirties, but she never pictures only one period of time; she has to think of them all, layered on top of each other like a Mexican dip. She's lived many lives, in many bodies, so her memories are oceanic—a body of water she swims regularly. She tried to count her lives once and reached thirteen before the project bored her. Some lives she entered as a walk-in, which meant she'd entered the body of someone whose soul had departed after either a physical trauma—like a car accident that left the person in a coma—or an attempted suicide. Those entries were innately exciting, and therefore her favorite kind. There was nothing like waking up in a new adult body, suffused in someone else's aura. She was always a little disappointed when—as in her current life—she entered in the traditional manner, as a baby.

The plane climbs, and Florida finds herself remembering her most recent wedding, only seven years earlier. Two dozen friends on the piece of Vermont land she and Bobby had recently bought. The five acres were pristine then, a meadow dipping down to a stream, with a forest on the far side. They'd only just started to plan—Bobby was in charge of this, a fact Florida would later regret—and were several months from building their home. Florida's friends had traveled up from the East Village, and there was a tent with Christmas lights and a local band. They danced in the smoky blue air to Pinoy music. Florida drank wine and shook her ass and tits and hair and sang along, her hand in her husband's. It was one of those magic evenings when happiness shone out of every heart and face, and Florida felt knitted together by love.

The memory makes her sigh now, wedged into an airplane seat. She feels the plane rise beneath her. She glances at Linda,

whose eyes are closed. She's keenly aware of the irony. This girl is running toward a husband, while Florida is running away from one.

The plane hits thirty thousand feet, and Mark Lassio remembers something from the night before, something he'd blanked out until this moment. He was at a club, celebrating a buddy's birthday—more a colleague than a buddy, actually—when he caught sight of an ex-girlfriend across the room. His most recent ex-girlfriend, who hated clubs, who hated to dance, who was, in fact, highly skilled at hating. She was certainly better at hating than she was at bond trading, which was her job. It was something she and Mark had had in common; they delighted in ranting to each other. After sex, they would lie in bed and take turns going off. They trashed co-workers, friends, bosses, politicians, their families, everyone. It was the best part of their relationship—there was a childlike joy to it, like flying downhill on a sled—and Mark felt a prick of true disappointment when his therapist insisted that it wasn't healthy.

His ex had noticed him a second after he spotted her. She stood by the far wall; a crowd of people were dancing and making out between them, and the music was a collection of beats pitched at a volume designed to shake the words out of your head. He shouldn't have been there at all; he was trying to stay clean, and he could smell the goddamn cocaine in the air. Sharp and tangy, like sliced lemon. Mark searched her face, and a question yawned open inside him. *Maybe? Could we? Did we once have?*

She met his look. She had dark, almost black, eyes. She shook her head and mouthed: *No*.

He mouthed back: *Fuck you*, and started to dance, something he rarely did anymore. He was off the beat at first and had to re-

jig his movements to match the thumping noise. He bounced on his toes and threw his arms over his head, and when the crowd yelled along to a refrain that he couldn't make out, he yelled too. A guy nearby gave him a startled look, then grinned and they crashed palms in a high five.

Veronica's voice issues from the PA, and Mark cranes to see her, but she's not in sight. She announces that the plane has reached a sufficient altitude that approved electronic devices can be used. He pulls his laptop out of the seat-back pocket at the same moment the woman sitting next to him pulls out hers. They give each other a weak smile.

"Deadline," she says.

"Life isn't life without them."

She screws up her face as if she's actually considering his words. This annoys him.

"Hmm," she says.

Mark wants to stop talking, but he also wants this lady to know that he's on top of everything. He says, "You have two boys. I was on the security line with you."

His seatmate—who's maybe forty-five, not that much older than he is but from a totally different place, probably the suburbs, definitely the marriage-and-kids lifestyle, which is another planet from the one that he lives on—looks startled. She squints at her laptop, which has powered up. "I do."

"I have a brother," he says. Then he thinks, *Sure, that makes sense. This lady looks a little like Mom, and the boys are Jax and me.* He remembers being with his family on a plane, heading to visit his grandparents. He and Jax are punching each other in the arm and splitting a Twix bar. His mom looks stressed, like this lady looks stressed, though he didn't understand why until he grew up and started to rattle like a boiling pot about to lose its lid. His mom, quiet with thin lips, who always seemed to be turning

away from him, took too many sleeping pills when Mark was eighteen and never woke up.

"I'm not sitting with them, with the boys, because I have work to do," the woman says.

Mark takes this as a request to buzz off. He turns his attention to his own screen, which is covered with detailed graphs and tables depicting market trends, losses, and indices of change. He scans the scalp trade. He processes the S&P numbers, the CME exchange, the latest bids. He's looking for the same thing he looks for every minute of every day: opportunities invisible to everyone but himself.

Linda slides both hands into her purse and wriggles the pregnancy test up her sleeve. She waits as long as she can before asking Florida to move.

"You have to pee?" the woman asks.

When Florida stands, her clothes chime. She steps into the aisle, and Linda sidles by. She hurries toward the bathroom and finds herself making accidental eye contact with a soldier sitting in an aisle seat.

"Hi," Linda says, more a squeak than a word.

He lifts a massive hand in greeting, and then she is past him, feeling even more flustered than when she first stood. There's a line for the bathroom, which she joins. In front of her, standing sideways in the aisle, is a tall, messy-haired teenager, the one she saw getting patted down earlier. He's wearing earbuds and jiggling slightly to unheard music. When he rolls his shoulders, even though the movement is slight, its carefreeness makes something inside Linda ache. He looks a little like an ex-boyfriend, one of the early ones. She remembers running her hands through wild hair like his and then brushes the memory away, because the boy

in front of her is most definitely underage. She'd observed him with the TSA officer and thought: *Why not just go through the machine?* She'd never understood people who took a stand. So what if the security machine was pointless? What was the point in making a fuss and irritating the people in charge? The airport wasn't going to redo its security system because of the opinions of one teenage boy, after all. She couldn't see the gain.

She fingers her sleeve and feels the crackle of the plastic wrapper. She used to hide test answers in the same spot during high school. She wonders if that piece of skin, right above the wrist on her right arm, is tired of bearing witness to her failures.

"Are you all right?" the boy in front of her asks. "Ma'am?"

"Me? Yes?" Linda wonders what her face was doing, to pull a teenager out of his own orbit. She tries to smooth her features.

"You don't need to call me ma'am," she says. "I'm only twenty-five." But as the words leave her mouth she realizes that, to this boy, twenty-five is *ancient,* and definitely ma'am-worthy.

The boy smiles politely and walks into a vacated bathroom.

Twenty-five is actually very young, she thinks, in the direction of the closed door.

When Linda was a teenager, she and her best friend decided twenty-five was the oldest acceptable age for a girl to be single. Gary is thirty-three, which is the perfect match for her age. It takes men longer than women to mature; by thirty-three, he's slept with enough people (nine, he told her, though she assumes that number is lower than the truth) to settle down. She has slept with enough men (sixteen) to want to stop forever. Guy number nine burned her with a cigarette in the middle of an orgasm; number eleven cheated on her with the high school math teacher, who was a man; number fifteen spent their rent money on meth. Only guy thirteen had a decent job and money in the bank, but his way of showing affection was to criticize. For her birthday, he

gave her makeup, and for Christmas, weight-loss pills. She broke up with him before Valentine's Day, but she'd left that relationship second-guessing every facet of herself.

A bathroom becomes available, and Linda scoots inside. She closes and locks the door, which activates the fluorescent lighting overhead. There is only one place to stand: directly between the toilet and the tiny vanity mirror. She pulls the test out from under her sleeve. She puts the top between her teeth and gives a little tug, splitting the wrapper.

She pulls down her white pants, then her underwear, and squats over the toilet seat with her arm between her legs. She takes a deep breath and pees on what she hopes is the stick. She remembers the teenage boy telling the TSA officer that he didn't like the pose people had to take inside the screening machine—something about it being degrading?—and wonders what he would think of *this* pose. Her thighs shake, and the plane trembles too.

In first class, Crispin Cox tries to ignore the twinges in his abdomen. Instead, he thinks of his first wife, Louisa, the one who never gave up. That's her tagline in his head: *the one who never gives up.* They've been divorced for thirty-nine years, much longer than they were married, and yet every few years her lawyer contacts his lawyer with some drummed-up excuse to take more from him. More money, more stock, more real estate. Sometimes in the name of their kids, sometimes for herself. And goddammit if she doesn't win half the time.

The nurse, next to him, says, "The doctor said that you were in stable condition, sir. But you seem to be in a fair amount of pain. Can you rank the pain on a scale of one to ten for me?"

"I'm fine," Crispin says. "I just need another pill."

Why does he remember Louisa so well—he could repeat verbatim their dialogue at Carlino's that night, when she wore her hair the way he liked and a peacock-blue dress—but he can't remember where they honeymooned, or the occupation of his youngest son, the bright, squirrelly one? His life is there, with all its characters, but clouds keep passing across the view. What he sees, what he recalls, changes every hour.

The nurse centers the pill on his open palm.

He says, "Stop looking at me like that."

"Sir, I'm just trying to do my job."

"Exactly," he says. "You're looking at me like I'm your goddamn job. I'm no one's job—never have been, never will be. Can you get that through your thick, mulish head?"

The nurse looks down, as if her feet have suddenly caught fire and she needs to watch the flames. *Jesus, some people are so weak. Blow on them and they fall over.* He pictures Louisa again and thinks: *She never looked away when I yelled*.

The flight attendant with the world-class hips is in front of him. Where did she come from? The pain is abruptly worse. A wave crests.

"Can I help out here at all?" she asks, in a smooth voice. "Would you like a beverage, sir, or a snack?"

But the pain is stuck, the wave fixed, and he can't speak. Next to him, the nurse is mute. She might even be crying, for Chrissakes. Crispin forces his hand into the air, hoping the gesture will make the flight attendant disappear.

"I'd love a beverage," a man across the aisle says, and Crispin closes his eyes, the pill safely beneath his tongue.

The plane gives a gentle bounce; Veronica places her hand on a seat as she swivels. It's quiet on the aircraft; only the overhead

vents can be heard clearing their throats. The passengers are pulled into themselves; the long flight has only just begun, and they need to get used to this new space, the silver bullet in which they will spend most of the day. They resign themselves to the new normal, one by one. The prevalent question is: *How should I pass this time before my real life resumes?*

Jane hides her smile while listening to her seatmate flirt when the flight attendant returns with his drink.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

"Here's your Bloody Mary, sir."

"Mark, please."

"Mark." Veronica readjusts her hips. "I'm from Kentucky," she says. "But I live in L.A. now."

"I'm from Baltimore. I live in New York, though. I couldn't live anywhere else. How long have you been in the flight industry?"

"Oh, five years, I guess."

He's nervous. Jane sees his knee bouncing beneath the tray he's lowered over his lap. She tries to block the scene out. She has to write. She has to finish polishing this script, which means rewriting most of it, before they land. She can do it; she's good at focusing when there's a gun to her head. The problem is that she doesn't want to. If she was sitting next to Bruce, and he wasn't annoyed at her, he would ask: *What do you want to do?* He always goes back to the origin, to the essential question. His brain never gets tied up with tangents and obligations and feelings, like hers does. Sometimes his head tips to the side while he's looking at her, and she knows he's thinking: *Do I still love her?* And then, every time so far, thankfully: *Yes*.

She's in first class because she spent weeks obsessively packing their apartment instead of writing. She knows which box Eddie's elephant is in and the exact location of each of Jordan's prized

books. She numbered the boxes in the order they should be unpacked in L.A. She'd wished, while packing, that there was a competition she could enter for moving a family cross-country with the greatest efficiency, because she would win first prize. When Lacey offered to drive to New York last week to help pull things together, Jane had laughed.

"Forgive me for trying to be helpful," Lacey said, offended.

"Oh, I know. I'm sorry, I was laughing because of me, not you."

The exchange fogged up with bruised feelings and their long history of poking and prodding each other, and though they both tried, neither was able to clear the fog before they hung up. Lacey and Jane have different operating systems, which often lands them in trouble. What they care about overlaps, but there are key divergences. Lacey has always, always wanted to fit in, which she believed required a husband, two kids, and a nice house in the suburbs. She wanted her life to look "right." This has simply never interested Jane much, as a concept. When she wanted something—a relationship, a baby, a job—she tried to get it. She rarely looked to her right or left to check on the progress of other women. She had been amazed once, at Lacey's house, to find that her sister subscribed to thirteen different women's magazines. There were subsets, her sister explained. Cooking, housekeeping, fertility, home decor, beauty. "What?" Lacey had said, in response to the look on her sister's face. "I'm not the weird one here. You are."

Lacey keeps score in her relationships in a way that is anathema to Jane but that she can use, in a moment like this, to help smooth away any wrinkles between them. *I'll phone her as soon as we get to the house,* Jane thinks. *Lacey will be touched that she was the first person I called from the landline. That's the kind of thing that matters to her.*

She notices that Veronica is gone and Mark looks forlorn, the

Bloody Mary cupped in his hand. His mood settles like a fine mist over her skin, and she starts to type.

The test instructions say that it takes three minutes for the results to show. The white stick stares blankly at Linda. She would like to pace, or even leave the room during this period, but that's not possible. She has to stand still. Perhaps because her body is stuck, her brain goes scattershot.

She remembers when she drank alcohol for the first time—Jägermeister—the night before the SAT. She arrived at the gymnasium to take the test on two hours' sleep, with what felt like a brain full of discarded engine parts. Six weeks later, her homeroom teacher, who'd always told her that her father was wrong, that she was smart and had a bright future if she'd only fight for it, went dead in the eyes when Linda told her how badly she'd scored. Linda saw her decide, in that moment, to move her hope and attention to a different, younger kid.

The bathroom lighting is terrible. Her skin looks yellow in the small mirror. And what was she thinking, wearing all white for a day of travel? She sticks her tongue out at the reflection and sees the scar from when she got it pierced at the age of thirteen. Another terrible decision. Linda had done it simply because a girl she admired had gone goth. Within two days, her tongue had swelled so badly that she was having trouble breathing, and her stepmother had to drive her to the ER. The incident delighted her stepmother, who henceforth liked to insert the memory into unrelated conversations. "You almost lost your tongue, you know. Then where would you have been? You'd have had even less chance of landing a man."

"I landed Gary," she says, to the mirror and her stepmother.

But she secretly shares her stepmother's skepticism, and always has. She worries that the only reason she and Gary have lasted an entire eleven months is because they've been long distance, and now that distance is about to disappear. They'd visited each other, sure, the most recent visit being six weeks earlier, but visits were short and therefore sweet. There wasn't time over a long weekend for crankiness or bad moods or long-held insecurities to arise. Day-to-day life in the same location would reveal all of Linda's flaws.

They'd met at a wedding—Gary had gone to college with the bride; she had once dated the groom—and ended up servicing each other's acute loneliness later that night. Linda had assumed it to be a one-night stand, but Gary texted her the following day on his way back to California. They'd chatted by phone and text over the next few weeks. When he told her that he studied whales, she'd felt a surge of annoyance and almost hung up. She thought he was making fun of her lack of education; he had a PhD, and she'd never even gone to college. He obviously thought she was so dumb he could claim to have a fantastical job and she wouldn't know better. More than that, the lie felt barbed, specifically tailored to take *her* down. She'd been obsessed with whales as a child. Posters of the giant mammals had covered her bedroom walls, and most of her treasured books had concerned sea life. It felt like Gary was mocking both the twenty-five-year-old and twelve-year-old versions of herself.

"You mean you're unemployed," she'd said, in her meanest voice.

"I'm emailing you information on my program."

They were still on the phone when she opened the link and saw video clips of bearded men in windbreakers on a boat in the middle of the ocean. She saw that one of the men was a sun-

burned Gary. The next clip showed a whale's hump passing the ship. Then classrooms and cubbies stacked with scuba gear, which is when she closed her laptop and started to cough.

When the coughing ended, Gary said, "Linda?"

"I had something in my throat," she said.

Linda assumed she and Gary were just friends, because she felt none of the obsessive worry she normally experienced when she was interested in a man. Her day improved after she spoke to him, and he provoked the hiccuppy giggle she'd tried to suppress her entire life. *Hideous,* her stepmother had once muttered, when Linda laughed in front of her. They've never talked about children; Linda has no idea how Gary feels about having one. He had a crummy childhood; he'd said that he would rather kill himself than go through that again. Her secret hope is that they can make a life, together, that will heal the broken paths behind them. *When I'm with you, I feel fixed,* he told her once, and though she wasn't able to utter the words at the time, she felt the same way with him.

There's a loud buzz, and the speaker in the ceiling announces the commencement of the beverage-cart service. Linda is aware, suddenly, of being thirsty.

"Hello?" The bathroom knob rattles, and a man's voice says, "You okay in there?"

"Yes!" Linda says, and grips the test in her hand like a spear. A pink plus sign wavers in the middle of the white. "Yes!" She slides the bolt open and lurches into the aisle.