

Reunions, Atrocious Manners, the Atlanta Airport

I didn't feel like going, but I went, and by the time I got there it was dark and everyone was poolside beneath tiki torches with flames bent sideways from the ocean wind, waves thundering on rocks, and all the faces were older now and hanging low because Blake was dead and therefore wasn't coming. Trip Champion (his real name!), my old classmate, the organizer, sent a group text hours earlier saying Blake had (and here's a warning about the mention of suicide) killed himself. Just last night at the same hotel where our twentieth high school reunion was taking place. Unbelievable. A heavy gut punch, even for me, someone who didn't like him much, though I liked him more than I liked the others. If there had been a "least likely to kill oneself" superlative, Blake would've gotten it. I could've won "most likely." Blake never sulked the way I sulked. I was a valedictorian-level sulker—moody, angry, most likely to take a swing at someone like Trip Champion. Blake was a rich physician with a beautiful wife and two daughters ages five and seven, lived in New Orleans, played jazz piano on weekends. Trip's text said he'd understand if no one felt like attending, but he'd be there to offer support, to make it a life celebration, which is what Blake would want, etc. So I thought of not going. Then I went. Then thought immediately of leaving.

When the invitation came, I'd ripped it up, pieced it back together, booked a flight, canceled, rebooked, then flown one thousand miles from Wisconsin to northern Florida to see the fifteen classmates I'd known for two years twenty years ago at the private high school my mom put me in when I got expelled from the public school for urinating on a teacher's desk. And for fighting. And for stashing weed and liquor in my locker. My probation officer told my mom a new environment might help, so she took out a loan, said I'd be driving a half hour to attend a college-prep private academy where I might, if nothing else, learn some manners. It didn't go well. But here I was, ready to make amends. I wanted to tell them I'd quit drinking.

I wanted to be tagged in a group photo and show it to Maria, my wife, as proof that I was finally over all the silly shit I kept dreaming about. They were more mature now too, certainly, so I hoped they'd be quick to forgive me, to say I'd changed. *I'd* matured so much—hair loss, weight gain, bifocals—I feared I'd have to introduce myself.

I moved toward the small group huddled near the diving board with Jill Christianson in the center of them, looking tan and fit, long hair, windblown, everyone holding drinks in real glasses. Jill declined my senior prom invitation because of Blake, whom I knew she was dating. But I'd asked her anyway, a dick move I wanted to apologize for.

The millionaire Jill married, the father of her four (or nine?) perfect children (according to her social media brags), looked handsomely supportive now, tan arm around her shoulders, and next to him stood George Shumate, who threw a New Year's Eve party he didn't invite me to (which didn't matter), and next to him his tan wife wore a strapless black dress, and next to her was tie-wearing, thick-haired, bank-inheriting Trip, who was a major player among local leaders promoting tourism when he wasn't skiing in the Alps or surfing in Maui, according to his brags. It was Trip who first put "Wal" in front of my name, Marty, as in, *What's up, Walmarty?* Because I worked at Walmart nights and weekends, the only one in the school who needed a job to help a single mom, apparently, which led me, one particular morning when the nickname sounded cruelest, to break his jaw for him. There was no spouse on his shoulder, so maybe he was alone, and when we made eye contact, there was something sad and forgiving there, so I smiled and turned my eyes to Jill, who tilted her head and said, "How are *you*?" so sincerely it threw me off guard.

"Terrible," I said.

"I can't believe it," she said.

Trip looked at me, said, "Did *you* have any idea? Did he ever—"

"No," I said, flattered that Trip would think I'd have access to Blake's inner life, that he might be remembering me as a popular kid who someone like Blake would trust with intimate info.

"How'd he do it?" I said. Surely I wasn't the first to ask.

Trip looked toward the top floor of the five-floor hotel. "He checked into a suite last night, wrote an email to his wife and daughters, then hung himself."

My first thought (the wrong one) was wondering what the ocean view rooms went for. My second thought was I felt sorry for the hotel worker who found him. But then, yes, of course, his poor devastated wife and poor daughters and poor friends. It was upsetting.

"That's upsetting," I said.

"I can't believe it," Jill said again.

"Did anyone see the email?" I said.

I was full of insensitive questions. But wouldn't a reason be nice? Wasn't the why of it what we wanted? No one responded. We had what DJs called dead air.

On graduation night, Blake and Jill rented a beach house, and the entire class went skinny-dipping, following Blake, the first to strip and sprint into the ocean. Afterward (why did I remember this stupid thing?), with all of us still naked on the beach, I made a drunken speech declaring my love for every classmate and expressing my earnest wish that we would remain lifelong friends. That summer, I worked two jobs and never saw the others, then everyone dispersed for college while I lived with Mom and sulked around the community college for the three years it took me to get a nursing degree. When others came home over summers and breaks, I kept working, kept sulking, gave up on getting in touch.

Jill's handsome spouse changed the subject. Tall guy in a red polo tucked into black shorts, stylish glasses, nice teeth, sandals. He said, "What do *you* do for a living?" Meaning me. *This* was an insensitive question. My answer would be an instant judgment on my gross value, my net worth, my intelligence.

"Information systems for NASA," I said. They kept staring. "Not really. I got fired seven years ago after being a travel nurse for ten years, moving around the country, which was hard, never staying in one place long enough to establish—you know—which has been a problem with me anyway, really, since my Dad split when I was two and left me alone with my mom, which was hard, and made me too angry while I was growing up. Got fired over this DNR thing I shouldn't get into involving this family in Idaho who wanted to go against their daughter's wishes; I mean, how long should you keep a zombie plugged in, you know? Then I moved home for a bit, met Maria, my wife, then six years ago moved with her to Wisconsin for her job. She's a music professor at a state university there—I met her when I had a job moving pianos. It was her idea that I come because I keep dreaming about high school, which, I know, get over it already, right? But I have a third shift job now as a custodial worker at a hospital, which was nice at first because of the quiet nights, but the loud ventilators and moans from patients and beeping machines are wearing on me, and the nurses and doctors never make eye contact, but they're all tired too. Maybe Blake's job is what did him in, I could see how."

"Wisconsin?" Jill's spouse said, like *Pluto*?

"I tried to get as far away as possible," I said, a joke that didn't land.

"You haven't changed," George said. "You're still an asshole."

"Ignore him," his pretty spouse said. "He's a psychiatrist, always on duty."

I hadn't meant to insult anyone. I was here to make amends.

"We're having a hard time right now," George said.

I heard the "we" as *them*, excluding me, which—OK, but still.

“I can’t believe it,” Jill said, off with a story about the time they saw U2 in Miami, followed by scuba diving in the Keys, the greatest time she ever had, she said, right in front of her husband, and she sobbed. Then Trip told of the time he and Blake road-tripped to Mexico, and *he* started crying.

“He invited me to his house once,” I said.

George stared at me coldly, like, *That’s your best Blake story?*

“For a study group,” I said. “For the final exam in Anatomy, which I was failing, which meant I wouldn’t graduate, so Blake invited me over to study. Asked me to come early so I could play his Steinway grand because he knew I spent lunch periods playing that old piano in the practice room.” I didn’t reveal that this particular night was among my best memories for the way Blake’s Steinway responded to my fingers while I played the Beethoven I’d taught myself on my Walmart-bought plastic-keyed Casio, and for how the sun slanted through the windows of that large room and spread across the hardwood floors, and for how Blake left me alone for a half hour then returned to hear the last notes of “Für Elise,” then put his hand on my shoulder and said, with feeling, “Sounds good.”

“He was so kind,” Jill said, and tucked her hair behind an ear, which the wind undid.

“I cheated like hell on that exam,” I said, hoping this would get a laugh. It didn’t. I’d kept a piece of folded paper beneath the test to see the names of bones and muscles, ligaments, arteries, blood vessels, the four systems of the body, the chambers of the heart.

“I stole a laughing Buddha bust from him that night,” I said. “Lifted it from a bookshelf and stuffed it in my backpack. I was going to apologize to him about that.”

“This isn’t about you,” said George, the psychiatrist.

Yes. I knew. Of course.

“Of course,” I said. “But *did* anyone see Blake’s email to his wife? I wonder what—”

“Excuse me,” George said, and walked to the shallow end of the pool and put his arm around Chrissy O’Connor, who was talking to Jim Carter, who put a hand on George’s shoulder. Chrissy rejected my senior prom invitation too, blaming it on her father, who said he didn’t know my family and didn’t like that I’d lost my driver’s license from a DUI and then got caught driving with a suspended license. I hoped Chrissy was as happy now as her posts portrayed, living in Barcelona, selling real estate, showing off her fluent Spanish.

“I quit drinking,” I said to the group that remained.

“Not me,” said Jill’s spouse, who believed he’d get another. Someone else said *me too* and others said they needed a bathroom. Then I was alone with Jill, who’d drunk too much.

She looked at me with her wet sad eyes, then hugged me. Her perfume was nice.

She said, “Don’t ever be going and doing what Blake did without checking with me first.” She kissed my cheek. And walked away. I stood there, alone again. Then slipped into

the hotel lobby, then to the parking lot, then drove the half hour home, to mom's house, sulking for old times' sake rather than calling Maria, who would say, "How'd it go?"

Once home, I went to my old room, too awake, still on my third shift schedule. I googled the cost of Blake's ocean view suite—\$800. I replayed images that would fall into dreams—Jill's kiss, *you're still an asshole*, Blake's face, a long email with words too small to see, *check with me first*, a Steinway grand splashed with light, Jill's perfume, Blake's rope, *you haven't changed*, a Buddha bust laughing from a landfill, a mother snoring down the hall.

"Please behave yourself," Mom said while I drove us to the family reunion she'd been telling me about for three months, planned to coincide with my trip home, apparently, which I insisted was unnecessary.

"I'm thirty-eight years old," I said. "Do you think you need to say *behave yourself*?"

"You're grumpy. When you get grumpy, you get childish and lose your manners. It takes some men a long time to grow up. You'll get there one day."

"I am not grumpy," I said.

I was grumpy. I hadn't slept. For breakfast? A bruised banana. And the August heat and humidity was a python-like assault on the lungs. Soon enough I was wiping my face with a paper towel while standing next to Uncle Stan and his cigarette and his barbecue smoker beneath an ancient oak tree in a park adjacent to the church that had helped convert me to atheism. Mom sat beside me, next to a table that held gallons of tea and red cups. Some cousins, aunts, and uncles had come from distant places, meaning Alabama. I looked for my favorites—an aunt who loaned mom my high school tuition money, an uncle who found and fixed a used car for me—but they were dead and therefore absent. Spanish moss blew from all the oaks like hung squirrels, and the warm wind was a relief. Uncle Stan talked of an approaching hurricane.

"I'll ride it out," he said. "I've got a twenty thousand-watt generator and a five hundred-gallon gas tank that'll keep the house going for ten days if we lose power, air conditioner and all."

Stan owned a lawn care business called The Grounds Crew, though he was the sole operator, working twelve-hour days to make rich people's lawns as pretty as golf greens, which explained the large bandage on his left cheek, where he'd had a carcinoma removed.

Two younger cousins, Marie and Lynn, each carried a baby they introduced me to.

"Where's yours?" Lynn said.

"In a dumpster," I said. "Seriously."

"You're still not right in the head, are you?" she said, not joking.

"Such atrocious manners," Mom said.

Lynn was still a server at a nice restaurant at the Jacksonville Landing, still getting shitty tips and regular abuse, still married to Bill, an electrician, and Marie was still married to Mark, a carpenter, and still worked at a fancy hotel where just two days ago, she said, someone checked into an ocean view suite just to hang himself.

“Must be nice,” Stan said.

My face must’ve given me away because Marie said, “What? Did you know him?”

“Good friend of mine,” I said, an exaggeration meant to give me attention, which was a childish move. “We went to high school together. I was at the hotel last night for a—does that room really go for \$800 a night?”

“Closer to a grand with taxes,” Marie said.

“Hey,” shouted my Uncle Vernon then, interrupting, rolling up in a wheelchair with an oxygen tank strapped to the back, tubes running to his nose.

“Who let you in?” he said, talking to me. One side of his face was bruised from a recent fall, the deep purple/black/red bruise that blood thinners made worse, eye swollen shut as if he’d stepped repeatedly into a heavyweight’s left hook. My mother’s other remaining sibling, he once stood six five, but he was crumpled now, gasping in the humidity. I was sorry to see him looking so bad, this man who bailed me out of jail when I got my DUI, who gave me a complete set of Louis L’Amour hardbacks, who told me repeatedly to stiffen my posture, to remove my hat when entering a house, to stand when a lady entered a room, to carry a clean handkerchief

Marie and Lynn wandered away, eager to avoid Vernon, who asked what it was I did these days. “For a living,” he clarified. He’d spent his life using his body in his work—construction, brick mason, roofer—and now his body was paying him back.

I told him what I did now after being fired for helping a terminal patient kill herself.

“Maybe you can help me later on,” he said.

“What time?”

“Sign me up too,” Stan said.

“Atrocious,” Mom said.

In two more hours, after eating and repeating similar updates with others, Mom said her goodbyes, which took another hour, then she pushed her walker to the passenger-side door of her Buick that I rushed ahead to open for her.

“Your manners have gone to hell,” she said.

Had they? I folded up her walker and stowed it in the back and got in to drive us home.

“I’m sorry,” I said, sounding like an infant.

“Maybe you should see a priest.”

“Maybe so,” I said, picturing such. With bourbon. With such honesty that the priest could share some shame too. I’d say, “Forgive me, Father, for I’m an asshole. I’ve tried

to connect, and I have failed.” I *had* tried. Why else attend such reunions? Why follow thousands of people on social media who don’t follow back? Why make a post one week ago announcing a social media break so I could rediscover the real self that grew murky while trying to make an online self attractive? An hour after that post, I reactivated to see if a single soul had liked it. Three people. One of them had been Blake. Then I deactivated again.

When we got home, I took a nap, woke at 10:00 p.m., with Mom asleep. We didn’t talk again until 7:00 a.m. on the way to the airport for my flight to Atlanta, where I’d lay over three hours before flying to Minneapolis, where I’d lay over two hours before flying home, ETA: 8:00 p.m.

She drove slowly, drifting across lanes. A tractor-trailer full of dead pines unleashed a horn on her rear bumper.

“I can’t see too good,” she said. “Cataracts.”

“Since when?”

“I’m having surgery next month. I’ve told you that.”

Had she?

“I can usually see tractor-trailers.”

I wondered who would drive her to the surgery and who would take her home? Shouldn’t I come back to help? Isn’t that what a well-mannered child would do?

At the airport, car running, she said, “I raised you to be a gentleman. Give it a try.”

I kissed her cheek, got my bag, watched her swerve toward a car that jutted around her.

At my gate, I popped a Valium to ease my flight anxiety, and in Atlanta, after a rocky flight, I took a second to cope with the mass of people rushing with bags that bumped against me in the overpacked tram. Someone was barefooted. Someone else wore a wrestling mask. Someone else wore—I had to look twice—a snorkel. When I reached my gate and found a seat, I looked at all the open mouths all around me, a germ-spewing horde of mouths opening around food, mouths moving into phones or toward each other, mouths of parents yelling at unruly children chasing each other as if they were in their living room. I worried what bad behavior I’d be capable of should the smallest little thing go wrong.

Then the gate worker announced a delay. Then there was a ruckus. Some lunatic had stormed up to the gate worker and started throwing a tantrum, asking whether she had any fucking idea what important work was being delayed because of the airline’s fucking incompetence. She didn’t. In that case, he said, could she get her fucking superior on the fucking phone right away, please?

I wanted to punch the man on the gate worker’s behalf, on behalf of all workers who got abused by assholes. Then the asshole’s phone went off, a work-related call, apparently, because he answered, stepped away, started explaining the injustice he’d suffered. The

whole scene shook me up. Across from our gate was a brightly lit headphone store, so I went there, found the nicest noise-cancelling model available, put them on and said, *oh yes*, how nice to be so isolated. They were more expensive than my overdue car payment, so I put them back and walked to a coffee shop, waited a half hour for a Venti Americano (also too expensive) and returned to my gate, where I sat, ears exposed to the loud talkers around me I resented because I couldn't afford to shut them out.

A half hour later, I walked across the thick carpet in first class enjoyed by rich fuckers drinking Bloody Marys from real glasses. I moved toward 13E, a middle seat in Comfort, also costly, but what choice did I have when airlines gouged hips my size? As I neared my aisle, I saw my seatmate at the window, a serene gentleman dressed in a type of white garb worn by practitioners of Tai Chi. He looked like a high-ranking monk (if ranking even exists among monks, which it probably wouldn't), saturated in wisdom, someone who valued honest stories about the essence of despair and the desire to shed regret and cease the self-loathing your past self says you're stuck with, etc., which is what I was only just now being able to articulate (to myself, at least). The monk held a book I intended to ask him about. If he looked up to see me, he'd see a portrait of patience while I waited for the slow-ass people ahead of me to stuff their big-ass bags into overhead compartments.

But he looked out the window now, fixed in a kind of reflection where forgiveness lived.

Someone sneezed, a man giggled, a baby screamed. The monk didn't flinch. Nor did he jump, as I jumped, at the flight attendant's amplified announcement: "We have a 285 on our hands, people. If you're not from Atlanta, you don't get that. We've got gridlock in the aisle, and a full flight, so please take your seats so we can stay an hour behind schedule." I slid past the vacant outside seat to the middle seat and lowered myself, holding the seat ahead of me for balance, then fell a half foot, exhaled from the effort and said, "Good morning" to the monk, who pulled his headphones (identical to the ones I'd tried on) up from his neck to cover his ears.

"I hear you," I said, raising my voice. "I wish I'd had some headphones like that during the class reunion and family reunion I just attended, on back-to-back days, if you can believe it, which has me asking how it is that so many of us—like my former classmate who seemed so happy—reach the ends of our ropes."

The monk stared ahead, concentrating, maybe misunderstanding. Did he know English?

"He hung himself," I explained. "Poor guy."

The monk pushed his left headphone back.

"Sorry?" he said.

"Thank you. I mean, we were never great friends, and we'd lost touch for a while, but it's still upsetting. He did it in an \$800 hotel suite. Who rents an \$800 suite to hang

themselves? Just shows how we can't know the private suffering of others, right?" The monk lowered his head and sighed, and suddenly I felt guilty about the negativity I'd emitted into our shared space.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I've just emitted negativity into our shared space."

"OK," he said, and lifted his book closer to his eyes to make it clear he'd prefer reading, a desire I respected. Plus, enough about me. In a moment, I'd ask about *his* private suffering, then demonstrate what unselfish listening looked like.

Was it selfish to wish that the person assigned to the aisle seat beside me would miss their flight? I hoped the seven-foot basketball player in a hoodie carrying a puppy kept moving. Also, the cowboy hat-wearing dude with briefcase. And please, no, I thought, not the man carrying a box of fried chicken who was slowing, looking, turning...into row twelve. He fell into the seat ahead of me, opened the box and lifted a chicken part, which in the airtight space of the tightly sealed plane unleashed an aroma so strong and beautiful it sent me into my dead grandmother's kitchen.

To the monk, I said, "How do you contend with the psychic noise of childhood?"

"Sorry?" he said, pushing back an ear covering once more.

"How do you contend with noise?" I swirled my hand to indicate the plane's interior.

"What noise?"

"Ha. Right. But how do you get to that place where you can be so very much in the now, which is hard for me, especially with the weekend I had."

He pointed to his headphones and offered no invitation for me to explain my weekend.

"My trouble?" I said. "My imagination is always taking me beyond the moment. But I'm trying. I'll try again. Beginner's mind, right?"

He resumed reading, and I watched passengers move down the aisle, casting instant yes/no votes on a potential seatmate based on how much I imagined they'd evolved from their high school selves. *No*, I said to the person whose T-shirt featured the bulldog in a spiked collar who represented a major university's athletic program. The bulldog shirt-wearer passed a bulldog hat-wearer, said, "Sic 'em." The hat-wearer echoed him, a greeting of solidarity that made me jealous, oddly, though the exchange was rendered in tones so tired I imagined their mutual team had suffered a big defeat. "I'm sorry for your loss," I wanted to say.

"Sic 'em," I said instead, out loud, to no one in particular.

The monk looked up, confused.

The aisle cleared, attendants closed overhead bins, and I got excited that the aisle seat would go unclaimed. I considered moving over as a compassionate gesture to offer space, but it would make talking more difficult. Then a passenger stepped aboard whose eyes went instantly to the seat. They talked loudly on an invisible phone for everyone's benefit.

Familiar voice. Familiar face. Familiar suit and tie. As the face and voice got closer, I saw, of course, that it was the raging lunatic who had earlier abused the gate worker.

“Of course,” I said.

The monk sighed heavily too, feeling the same disappointment, no doubt. He closed his book and crossed his arms as if to embrace the suffering caused by this hostile prick who dropped down with inconsiderate gusto, still talking loudly, promising the listener they’d be up 15 percent by the close. He brushed against my shoulder and grunted because of the discomfort I was causing. The attendant closed and locked the cabin door, said please discontinue the use of mobile devices except as a flotation device.

The lunatic said, “An hour could ruin everything, but that’s out of my control. I’m making peace. I’m concentrating on my breathing, playing it where it lies.”

“Oh please,” I muttered. “Playing it where it lies.”

The lunatic ended his call, then pointed across my lap to the Monk’s lap, said, “That’s a good book. I’m quoted on page 74.”

The book was called *The Radical Zen of Wall Street*. The cover featured a bull wearing a ring through its nose, atop which sat a Dalai Lama-type figure, eyes closed, fully robed, palms on knees facing up. I felt betrayed. The raging lunatic reached inside his coat pocket to retrieve a business card he passed across my lap while brushing against my shoulder (emitting another sigh). The fake monk, seeing the name on the card, gushed like a kid meeting Spiderman. He removed his headphones, said, “An honor,” then bowed to the asshole. He dug into a bag at his feet to pull out his own card that he passed beneath the coffee I lifted to accommodate them. When the fake monk pulled his arm back, I lowered my coffee cup so it collided with his arm, then popped the lid with my thumbs and dumped my coffee onto the lap of He-Who-Is-Quoted-on-Page-74. Clearly, it appeared intentional. Because it was.

You would think the fool had been set on fire.

“Son of a motherfucking bastard,” he shouted, and jumped into the aisle. He yelled for the flight attendant, pointed to his crotch, then at me, said, “This fool dumped hot coffee on my lap, which is aggravated assault, and I’d like him removed as a security risk.” The flight attendant stared at me like, *Would you care to deny or defend or explain any of this silly shit?*

I surrendered. I said, quite calmly, “I’d love to be removed.”

The lunatic stepped back to let me by. He said, “You need to get some fucking help, psycho-freak—you’re lucky I don’t sue your fat ass back to the Stone Ages.”

Which sounded excessive. My peaceful exit was a spectacle—the flight attendant reopening the cabin door, the light flooding in, me walking out to applause, the door closing behind me. I trudged up the empty tunnel, as heavy-footed and as slow as the last man

on Earth. I made it as far as the gate I'd just left, empty now, sat near the window and watched my plane (and my checked bag!) back away.

My phone said 9 percent battery life remaining.

I knew I should let Maria know I'd been delayed, but I didn't want to explain the reasons. No need to call Mom, who might wonder whether I'd changed at all since that time I urinated on a teacher's desk. I didn't know if my credit card could handle another flight. Maybe I'd been declared a threat to national security and put on a no-fly list.

I reactivated social media. No notifications. But there was Blake, tagged in a group photo of reunion goers posing in front of the pool with half-hearted smiles. I wasn't in the shot, of course. Which was fine. That seemed right. I scrolled through Blake's time line to see the tributes, the pics of good times, the RIPs, the broken heart emojis, most from people I didn't know. Then there was Blake's two little girls, laughing in a pumpkin patch, then his wife neck-deep in waters off Greece, then Blake smiling wide from behind a piano in New Orleans.

I walked. It helped to move, to stay in motion even while standing on the sliding sidewalks. I watched the news carried in every weary face and tired body, the walking wounded hauling their histories, lugging grief and regrets, navigating the limbo that came from taking one's head above the clouds then reintroducing it, only partially, to Earth. They exited planes, turned one way, reversed, collided, continued. People with canes, in wheelchairs, in beeping carts, people running for tight connections, toward loved ones who were dead or dying. Blake's face popped up in crowds of people who veered around me. I saw him in a bathroom, standing at a urinal. On a shoeshine stand. At the end of a bar, drinking a beer. I stopped and called his name. The stranger turned to me, and I walked away. I put my hand on the sliding handrail of a moving sidewalk and imagined all the germs I was collecting from so many millions of hands, then pulled my handkerchief from my back pocket and kept it on the sliding handrail for cleaning. Did the same with the next. And on escalators. My handkerchief turned black. How long would it take to wipe every handrail in the airport? Could I get a job cleaning the airport?

In another hour, my phone said 1 percent. I wasn't tempted to buy a new charger. I looked forward to my phone's death. I walked for hours, winding through every concourse. Entered a train at some random spot and exited at another and kept walking without looking at signs. I walked until my shoes wore blisters on my feet, then I kept walking. I walked until my legs grew numb and said they could walk no more, then I entered an empty gate and went to a row of chairs near the windows so I'd disturb fewer people. I made a couch of the seats and slept.

When I woke it was because Blake had grabbed my shoulder with a clawed hand and said, "Sounds good." It was dark now and the world made sense. I sat up, faced the

windows and listened to a group seated behind me speaking a language I couldn't place. I couldn't decipher the meaning of a single word, but I understood the weariness from exhausted and exiled travelers. I could see all the way back to Maria, who would be worried now, so I sent her a message, telepathically, that I was on the way, that I was eager to show her how what I'd just learned this moment would save our lives. But I was in no hurry. I wanted to stay longer among these strangers and listen to the music in their language, so familiar and strange, and suddenly so welcoming.