

Confessions in the Clouds
July 2018

“I’ve made up my mind to ask for a divorce,” the woman said.

“Wow,” I replied. “Have you told your husband?”

“No, you’re the first person I’ve told. You’re the only one who knows.”

This was an abrupt switch in conversation, from her introducing me to Cuddl Duds—the only thing that kept her warm during the long winters where she lived and she knew they would keep me warm too and JC Penney, by the way, carried them—to my suddenly becoming the single confidante in her life. We had only known each other for two hours and would only know each other for two hours more. The plane would descend, she would head for her next Gate, and I would head for the Passenger Arrival doors, and I would carry her secret, probably for as long as it took her to settle into her seat for the last leg of her journey and turn to the person next to her. I hope that person was a good listener. She clearly needed someone.

I’ve been told that I’m a good listener. I’m glad when my friends open up to me and, through their conversation, invite me to be a part of their situations, their emotions, their need to make a decision, their need to just travel aloud through the details and complexities and brick walls. I am grateful that I can be there for a friend, my only hope that I have done some good, even if my role is a long ribbon of silence.

Traveling alone by plane, I would like to say, is different. When I have started such a solitary journey, extending my boarding pass to the Airline Gate agent, I ardently remind myself that I owe nothing to anyone. That time wonderfully waits for me to curl into myself and read the book I’ve selected for the trip, always a page turner. A good murder mystery or a plot driven by eccentric, believable characters. I vow that as soon as I find a seat on the plane, I will open my book and stare, brow furrowed, into it, thus shutting out any initiations of conversation by the person to my left or right. This vow has nothing to do with a lack of congeniality and everything to do with highly selfish pleasure. As mother, teacher, and wife, I have often rued the scarcity of reading time. My sudden, albeit temporary existence as nothing more than a passenger on a craft over which I have absolutely no control, allows me the delightful opportunity to shut out the world, to dismiss all sense of responsibility, to even lose sight of myself!

That is my solitary traveler’s vow, and it is one that I am never able to keep because for some reason, those who randomly choose the seat next to mine seem, in our temporary time together, to want to dig urgently to a level of intimacy that really should not be—or should it be—a part of strangers’ chatter. And for some reason, I let that happen. Perhaps for that very reason—that we are and assuredly always will be strangers.

Not too long ago, the flight attendants allowed those of us who were “continuing on” to disembark the plane for thirty minutes while some quick maintenance occurred. A woman and I headed straight for the long Starbucks line. Within minutes, after a bit of small talk, Carolyn teared up and told me that she and her husband had been visiting their son, now in a job of

extreme stress and potential danger. “We’re thinking of moving to DC,” she said, “to be near him.” She began to cry and I grabbed both our lattes, her hands now free to grope in her purse for a tissue. “What do you think about that?” she said.

A few years earlier, Judy said she had flown from the east coast to Denver to take the yearly road trip with her friend, Peaches. They’d gone to college together. They were dearest friend. Their road trip over, Judy was heading back east. “And here’s the thing that is so upsetting,” she said. “I love Peaches like more than a sister. We’ve always taken her car and divided the driving, but honestly, she can’t drive anymore. She’s not safe.” She placed her hand on my wrist and said, “Tell me how I should tell her.”

Once, my planned flight from Denver to the small northeast Wyoming town where I lived was cancelled because of a major snowstorm. No one had any idea as to when service would resume. I was stuck. I situated myself in a secluded Gate seat, opened my book and picked up where I’d left off in my Albuquerque hotel room the night before. I had turned only a few pages of my page-turner when other stranded travelers began settling into the seats around me. Soon, two muscular, tall, tanned men, seemingly tangled in elongated travel cases and duffle bags, arrived at the row of seats across from me. It took them some time to remove themselves from their canvas cases, decorated with zippers, Velcro, snaps, grommets, pouches on pouches, and luggage tags. This extrication, as well their intense-voice conversation, was suddenly more interesting than my book. I decided they were spies. I smiled. They smiled and ambled over to my side of the area and introduced themselves. I hadn’t been too off-base in my imaginings. They were big game hunters, just returned from nearly a year in Africa.

“You kill elephants?” I asked. You can ask any question in an airport. You know you will never have to explain or defend your ideas or beliefs for any sustained period of time. You know as well that if any conversation escalates to an uncomfortable level, airport security will swarm out of nowhere.

“No,” said the one named John. “But we have killed lions.” If he thought he would get points from that comment, he didn’t know the fierce allegiance of a mother to a young son who adored *The Lion King*.

This was an airport, though, and we were all stranded together, the hunters having lost their flight to California, where they both lived. Irritation dissolved as soon as it surfaced. They showed me pictures of their wives and children. I told them about my husband and sons. They described the animals that they watched for hours, the environment they had spent so long in. As well, they shared during our many hours together their fear—that they would not be able to assimilate back into the coastal California life, into their lives as husbands. They had loved Africa and what it had offered them as hunters, not necessarily as those who hunted, too much. John and I exchanged Christmas cards for a few years, but that is not the way of airport friendships, and eventually each of us removed the other from the Christmas list.

Years later, I settled into a middle seat, crammed my Mary Poppins bag under the seat in front of me, and opened my book. As the plane freed itself from the runway, the woman to my left turned to me and said, “I hate this part,” and so began the conversation that would eventually

result in another, more critical attempt to carry the intimate conversation long past the flight. I will call this woman Gina, so afraid am I still that by talking to others about her, I will unleash the authorities.

We talked of our jobs, of her daughter and my sons, of the reason for our being on this flight, and then Gina, her voice soft, shared with me that she had, as a child, crossed the border in the trunk of a car. Neither a marriage nor a child of her own could protect her from deportation. Yet, she has worked hard in this country, paid taxes, spoken out for the plight of others, cared for many. She wanted to write her story but had no idea how to do it. I told her to think of her most vivid memory, and of course it was of her *abuela*, her grandmother, who raised her, who used the evil eye to keep danger away from Gina, and from Gina's cousin, who was eventually killed. I told her to start with her grandmother.

“But that's not the beginning,” she said.

“Never start at the beginning,” I said.

As we flew to our common destination, she wrote and shared. I learned much, encouraged her to never stop writing. As the plane began its descent, she folded the papers she had written on, looked at me, and simply said, “I see.”

The long flight and our conversation ended, I walked with her to the Baggage area. We opened our arms for the usual quick hug of goodbye, and we did not let go. Not for a long time. We cried and decided to exchange email addresses. “We're starting in the middle,” she said. I fear, with the many months' talk of deportation, immigrants as criminals, destruction of families, that we actually started at the end. I wrote, she wrote, a long missive about how her visit to Mount Vernon upset her because she could feel there the heaviness of slavery. I wrote. I wrote again. I didn't want to let her go.

Silence.

I had believed that I could somehow help her, protect her, but in airplane conversations, airplane friendships, there is no foundation, no history, no means to do the responsible. What is created is as unstable as clouds.