Spring 1997

Captain Kirk

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CAPTAIN KIRK

Flaps move on the plane and we move off the map. I'm stuck in the tourist-econo seats back beside the barking vowels of the engines and I can't hear half of what is told me. I possess dull nausea and cocktail napkins for earplugs. I'm breathing beside a raven beauty who is journeying back to North Carolina. We flirt, tamper mindlessly with the movement of blood from heart to hair.

"Captain Kirk has turned out the seatbelt light..." Passengers snicker, whisper: Captain Kirk, ha ha.

Captain Kirk goes crazy. "You think I don't hear you? God I wish that damn show had never been on." We regret our snickering and turn to the windows for solace. At 33,000 feet the high plains are a thing of beauty, water-worked with scars and depressions, oxbows and crazy twists. We swim over them and I see a flimsy matchbox town built in an ancient riverbed; what if the big river returns, brown and swollen, hungry as the next virus?

We fly straight through an electrical storm. From the back, I watch a glowing unearthly ball roll down the aisle toward me, a ghost's bowling ball, a whirling of lit knives. I'm looking for a parachute, I'm looking for God.

"Ball lightning," says the calm North Carolina woman. "It happens to me all the time." She feels she may attract this particular phenomenon while in the air, just as my face attracts sticks on the ice.

Years ago on Long Island I took Billy Smith's goalie stick to my chin: 18 stitches and a piece of wire that won't go away. There wasn't enough skin to close
it. I have several sizeable screws in my ankle. I now wait to trigger the more delicate airport alarms.

Our plane stops at the mountain airport. The snowplows are out roving the runway. Everyone recalls what happened before with a plane and snowplows at this exact crappy airstrip. A red light flashes on our wing and reflects in a glass an older man holds over his chest, precisely where his heart would be, as if I am hallucinating his pulse. The plane jerks to the right and his red heartbeat is gone. We are a line of portholes flung into the black air, over Doukhabor colonies, our small plane lurching between sawtooth peaks. I reflect on the plane being made of the same material as beer cans and I reflect on the rows of rock teeth below and beside our alloy skin. There is too much time to think on planes, on buses, lost in the ozone. The river loves its channel but seeks another. For a while. I’m reminded of Marilyn Monroe slumming in Jasper. My polite father.

Waitress X is leaving in August for journalism school down east. I both dread and want this. I don’t know what I want. To touch her blouse. They’re still there, she says. Now I know what you do, says Waitress X as we hug. First you grab my ass and then you touch me here. When she tells me this I realize we’ve hit an expiry date of sorts; I’ve become predictable. I have to stop. It’s over. But what if she calls me on Tuesday? Say sorry? I don’t know that I can. But I know it’s over. Waitress X can’t pay her rent, is moving back in with her mother to save for school, yet she’s always trying to buy me things. I in turn offer her an airplane ticket and can’t believe I’m doing it. My cells vibrate after I see her. I forgive all. What are we going to do, I kept saying to her at first.
“What are we going to do?” she asks one day.
“How come when I finally stop asking that, you start?” I say.

She had a slow night but made $100 in tips. Her girlfriend Judy said to her, I saw your new boyfriend with his wife. Meaning me. Her friend doesn’t approve, doesn’t like me and I don’t blame her. Judy says to her, So it’s just sex then. JUST sex? I wonder. Waitress X asks, Can’t she smell my perfume? Good question. Isn’t it written on my face? I wonder. Can’t everyone tell?

Waitress X pilots an old-fashioned $5 bicycle, skirted long legs lifting, a basket of fat blackberries and speckled eggs as a gift for breakfast, my favorite meal. She smiles, we don’t really know each other. Her father drank and died in a plane. When young she found a note from her mother to her father, pinned to their pillow. She was not meant to see it. She ran away to the ravine briefly because of what she had read, part of which was a sexual slight related to her father’s drinking. Will this happen to me? A note on the pillow or a fax singing through the lines? There was a cave she hid in before returning home the next night. Her mother made her see a psychiatrist; now she sees me. We’re necking. I want to run off with her to a cave in Mexico to solve things, to have a happy ending. Her black bra is visible under her loose knit sweater. Laughing, she points this out, “See?” I see. I see that this won’t last, that she’ll tire of the problems, of sneaking around in the afternoon, and I could tire of her body, I suppose, though it does not seem likely at this particular moment. It’s wilder because we rarely can see each other, can never just go to a movie, go on a nice date, eat supper at home, laze on the couch. It’s “just sex.” She picks up every lunch tab, pays for everything, says she pays for all her boyfriends, they’re
always bums. She finds this somehow amusing about herself. On my birthday she brings more gifts: pepper paté, purple grapes, barbecue chicken, mums. I push it; I gamble. I abuse her, call her my plaything, my sex object, knowing these words are forbidden, and she just laughs, says, You’re funny. She has her own wit.

Waitress X gives the pack of dogs a good talking to. The dogs snicker at first, then, realizing their mistake, they try to look more serious. Her hair streams into a city and lanterns of a metropolis swim under her bare feet. Down the hill we make out pink trembling neon of Babel, of Babylon: Girls Girls Girls, say the signs, Cold Suds, Karaoke, Ask About Our Famous Deathburger. I have no name for the color of her eyes. There’s a sign on the Team entrance: WINNING STARTS HERE! We lose. Coach shoves the talking heads from our locker room. Get your fat sorry asses...get...and stay away from the damn coffee machine...bunch of freeloaders...wouldn’t piss on us if we were on fire...Put that in your column, ya backstabbing deadbeats!

I have too many women and I’m still lonesome. I know, I know; I complain no matter what. Coincidence 1,2, & 3: their periods arrive at the same time. Both had a sister die when they were younger. One drowned off a pier and one burnt in a straw Halloween costume. A candle in a jack-o-lantern; the sister ran flaming into the evening. Both avoid talking to the surviving sister.

Yet Another Weird Coincidence: My Intended gets a hot new job in film, in an office right beside Waitress X’s apartment building. I mean thirty feet between a metal desk and an iron bed. What exactly are the odds of this happening in a city of 700,000? I can no longer drop by during the day. Of course Waitress X
finds this hilarious. What are we going to do? We’re going to do nothing.

I didn’t ask but am told the latest opiate of the peoples: speedwalking, Universal, Nautilus, gravity boots, 50 situps a day for a new order. Listen: I have spent the family retainer, the advances, the signing bonus, the salaries, the money from local carpet commercials, from Mr. Plywood ads. I have borrowed from women I slept with who hate me now, from dipso players who wanted a drinking buddy. I bought the world a drink. I ran up my Visa, hit the limit five times and they kept raising like it was a poker game. 50 situps is not going to do it.

Once more our plane moves off the map and once more I’m planted in the tourist-econo seats, flaps altering their stance as our celestial metal flophouse crosses Mountain Standard Time, crosses the standard dangerous mountains and doomed bears snoring in their sparkling caves. This trip there is no ball lightning, no calm woman from North Carolina. The team plays cards and wears garish ties to denote a road trip. The great plains are flooding: the brown river returns to cover its ancient bed and wipe out the matchbox town, dead cattle and broken oaks and renegade coffins spinning in its place. Under the No Smoking sign, under her makeup, the stewardess sings her weary pantomime and Captain Kirk tells us again what we can and cannot get away with in his narrow hurtling kingdom.