

The Flight

KiKi Leigh Theilemann

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Her heart pounded with every thud of her running feet. Handle gripped in her sweaty palm, the clicking suitcase rolled close behind. *Come on legs*, she thought, pissed at herself for wearing pumps instead of sneakers.

If only that taxi driver hadn't insisted on taking 5th after she told him he was a total idiot, or that annoying TSA agent who insisted he examine her nail clippers, she wouldn't be running through JFK like a nut. Did a petite, forty-year-old woman with a French braid really look like a terrorist? Waste of money, those agents.

Panting under her damp, cloth mask, she turned the corner to her concourse. Adrenaline shot through her body when she saw her gate, and she picked up speed. There was no saying how much time she had to make her flight, but if there was any left, it wasn't enough to slow down—especially since her gate seemed to be at the farthest end of the terminal. Just her luck. Continuing to dodge travelers and custodians, her anxiety flickered as she noticed a crowd exiting a gate and blocking the entire walkway. *Not now*.

Bobbing her head around to find a path, she saw a small opening between an elderly woman with a cane and a family walking in the opposite direction. It would be tight, but she could slide through if she moved fast enough. She sucked in her gut to squeeze through the clearing, then bolted. A muffled thump trailed from her luggage. Looking over her shoulder as she continued to run, the sight of the frail woman collapsing to the ground met her eyes—the woman's cane still sliding across the floor. *Crap*.

"Sorry!" she shouted, continuing to run. Not like anyone would hear her. Would it be better if they had? It didn't matter now, she needed to hurry.

Closing in on her gate, she watched an agent pick up the microphone. The door was still open!

“Paging passenger Alison Reed. Last call for flight 2187 to Atlanta.”

“I’m coming!” Her cry was muffled through the fabric covering her mouth.

Without noticing Alison’s frantic plea, the gate agent grabbed the door handle and began shutting it.

Ripping her mask off so the woman could hear her, she shouted again. “I’m here!” This time, the gate agent looked up.

“Miss, you’ll need to have your face covered,” she said, still holding the door halfway.

“I know, I know.” Alison shoved the annoying cloth over her mouth again. “It’s just that you couldn’t hear me...” she took a few breaths, “and I didn’t want to miss it.”

The agent’s apathetic expression remained. “Boarding pass please.”

Looking through her cross-body bag, she ruffled through candy wrappers and pill bottles.

“Miss, we need your boarding pass now or we’ll have to—”

“It’s here!” she pulled out the crumpled piece of paper with a smile.

Annoyed, the agent scanned the ticket and motioned for her to proceed through the gate. A quick click of the door echoed through the jet bridge as she jogged to the plane, slowing down only when she stepped on board.

Empty seat after empty seat met her eye at the front of the aircraft. Either a lot of people had missed their flight or it wasn’t even close to capacity. Hoping she would have the entire row to herself, she looked at her boarding pass. 28B. Grumbling when she saw the single, empty middle seat in the crowded back of the plane, she dragged her carry-on through the tight aisle. An audible groan escaped her mouth as she stopped next to that row, her seat directly in front of a young child. Not exactly the roomy, quiet space she’d hoped for.

“Ma’am, we’ll need you to take your seat so we can get the plane moving.” A too-sweet, southern accent came from behind.

Turning around, Alison saw a young brunette with freshly curled hair pulled back into a high, teased ponytail. “I’ll take my seat when I get my bag overhead,” Alison grunted, reaching up to shove some luggage to the side.

“Here, let me help you with...” the flight attendant started, reaching for the luggage. The drawl, slow as honey, made Alison’s skin crawl. It was the same, fake-sounding accent that she endured her entire childhood from the gossiping girls she swore she would never be friends with. The same voice she spent months getting rid of herself when she moved to New York and started her career in marketing. Thank God she got away from the traditional child-rearing and housewife duties that bound her two sisters to a life of serving dinners for their men and wiping their children’s asses.

Alison jerked it away from the intrusive stewardess with a glare. “Thanks! But I think I can get it myself.”

Without a response, the young woman took a step back and waited as Alison attempted to shove her oversized carry-on into a space too small for it. She pushed it harder, a bead of sweat dripping from her brow. *Come on, you stupid bag.* If only she hadn’t packed that extra makeup kit, worried her mother would notice the bags under her eyes from lack of sleep and extra anxiety. She shoved it again, feeling the annoyed stares from those ignorant passengers who probably paid extra to have their luggage checked. She pushed a third time, with near success except for someone’s purse getting caught on the wheels. She pressed the pocketbook to the opposite side, trying to make the space bigger.

“Ma’am, if it doesn’t fit we’ll have to—”

“It’s going to fit!” Alison stopped to look at the girl again. Then, with one last heave, the suitcase popped in. “Yes!” she shouted, louder than intended. She eyed the attendant’s name tag. “I’ll take my seat now, Susan.”

“You can call me Suzie.” Her voice turned up at the end.

“Thanks, Susan.”

Without acknowledging the cross-armed man who didn’t have the decency to move his legs, let alone stand up as she nearly collapsed over him, she plopped in her seat. Could it really have hurt so much if he just scooted an inch to the side? She thought about giving him a piece of her mind, but opted to keep her mouth shut in case he turned out to be the serial killer she just read about on social media. Instead, she buckled her seatbelt and shoved a pair of earplugs from her purse as far into her ears as they would go. After slipping her bag under the seat in front of her, she closed her eyes. At last, a moment to relax. She breathed in as deeply as she could through the heavy, cloth mask as the plane started moving.

It couldn’t have been more than a minute of peace when she felt the first jolt. Then the second. And then a series of rapid fire bursts against her seat. She yanked the earplugs out. If that kid couldn’t contain himself for the entire flight, there was a high likelihood she would crawl back there and knock him out.

“Do you mind?” she peered over her seat at the bratty kid sitting between his inconsiderate parents.

“I’m sorry, he has Autism and is quite nervous,” the mother responded, trying to excuse her ill-behaved son.

“Well, maybe you should’ve thought about that before booking his ticket.”

“He can sit behind me,” the middle-aged woman in the window seat said. “I don’t mind.” Wasn’t she a saint.

“That’s very kind of you. Thank you,” replied the father, moving his now-screaming child to the window.

The shrieks grew louder, but at least Alison had some earplugs to muffle the noise, and a less-jerking seat. Why did people feel the need to fly with their uncontrollable children anyway? Good thing she never had any of her own. She’d probably be a crappy mom anyway—maybe that was one prediction her own mother would’ve gotten right. No. The hell with her mother. She would’ve been a great mom if she wanted to have kids. But who in their right mind wanted to spend their days and money cleaning up after merciless children who put their hands and mouths on everything? The screaming continued.

Even with the earplugs in, she could still hear the shrill cries. Heart rate rising as she was about to turn around again, Susan walked up to the commotion. At least someone was attentive to the disturbance.

“Is there anything I can help you with, folks?” Her high-pitched voice probably set the kid off again.

“I’m sorry,” apologized the mother. “He has Autism and it’s his first time flying. He’s very nervous, and his soft blanky got put in his check-through luggage by mistake.” *Figured.*

“Oh no! Let me go get you one of our pre-packaged, 100% sterile blankies that we save for only the most special passengers.” The act was a bit much.

“Oh, that would be great, thank you.”

Reaching over the unkind man in the aisle seat, Alison motioned to stop the flight attendant.

“Sorry to interrupt, but could I just move to one of those empty seats up there before we take off? I think that might be best for everyone.”

“I’m sorry, we can’t move passengers once they already have their seat printed on their boarding pass. It’s for everyone’s safety.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s not a real thing.”

“Ma’am, are you questioning our policies?”

“No, just your knowledge of them,” she mumbled under her mask.

“What was that?”

“Glad you have a good knowledge of them.”

Susan stared at Alison for a few seconds as if she wanted to respond, but instead walked to the back of the plane as the boy’s sobs grew louder.

Rolling her eyes and clenching her fists, Alison grabbed her purse from under the seat to rub on some of that high-end lavender and mint calming lotion. It was a life-saver last year when she found out about her mom’s deteriorating health and started having more panic attacks. Thankful she bought a separate travel-sized bottle, she massaged a bit into her temples and behind her ears.

As she began breathing in the less-than-potent fragrance filtered by her mask, Susan returned with the blanket for the boy.

“Well, here ya go, young sir!”

“Oh, bless you! We can’t thank the staff enough for their kindness,” the mother replied.

“It’s our absolute pleasure to ensure your comfort.” The pleasantries were sickening, but at least the screams had stopped. Alison was going to need more than that lotion.

“Excuse me, Susan.” Alison interjected the conversation with a wave. “Can I get a gin and tonic, please?” Maybe by adding her own manners, she’d get some true service. She pulled her credit card out from her purse and reached it over to Susan.

Backing away from the plastic, the flight attendant eyed Alison as if she requested help removing belly button lint.

“Oh, I’m sorry, ma’am, but there are no refreshments on this flight until we’re up in the air at cruising altitude. Can’t risk anyone spilling and getting germs on everything. And when you do want to make a purchase, we highly recommend using our app on your personal device so we don’t have to exchange money and risk transferring more germs.” Her fake smile under her pink, polka dot mask made Alison’s stomach churn.

Alison pursed her lips as she slid the card back in her wallet. “I’ll just wait then.”

Still donning a fake smile, Susan walked a few rows in front of her and then turned around, holding a seatbelt and life jacket for the safety spiel. What was the point of these talks anyway? It’s not like anyone actually paid attention.

With anxiety growing from every annoyance around, Alison rummaged through her purse for her Xanax. If she couldn’t get a drink, she could at least get a tranquilizer. She opened up her bottle and counted the white, oval pills. 14 left. Her stomach tightened when she calculated the number of days she’d be gone, combined with the number of “old friends” who “couldn’t wait to see her” over the week, and the probability of having to pop one of her trusty companions at each visit. Maybe her doctor would have prescribed her more if she hadn’t told him he was an uncompassionate, lonely old scrooge who was more concerned about the letter of the law than the spirit of it. Probably not.

As she weighed out the risk of taking one now and potentially not having enough for the rest of the week, she felt another jolt to her seat. Looking back, she saw the same, blonde-haired boy clinging onto a red blanket with feet firing rampant. The little bastard figured out how to kick the seat sideways. Without further contemplation, she slid a pill out from the orange bottle and popped it in her mouth. The metallic taste spread over her tongue as she dug through her purse for some water. Then, remembering that water apparently is a key component in making bombs, she cursed the TSA once again and dry swallowed. It was going to be a long flight, and they hadn't even taken off.

Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Alison squeezed her eyes shut and tried picturing a deserted island. The serene beaches with white sand that her shrink asked her to visualize always helped calm her when things got stressful at work. Somehow, it wasn't working as well in this setting. She tried to imagine the air vent was a gentle breeze blowing through the palm trees, but the calming beach scene turned into an earthquake. Opening her eyes to the dull, blue and brown seat in front of her, she ripped her seatbelt off and turned around to the boy who was still shaking her seat.

"Okay! That's it, bud—" she didn't finish her sentence before the roar of the engines overpowered her voice, startling the boy enough for him to grab his legs and rock in his seat.

With the parents' eyes glaring into Alison's soul, she turned back around and buckled up. Taking a deep breath and closing her eyes again, she sank back into the world of warm sand and gentle waves. The engines rumbled louder, and her breathing calmed. Finally, some peace as the plane shot down the runway. But as the front wheels lifted up, the muffled screams from the boy grew louder. *Oh hell.* When was that Xanax going to kick in?

Giving up on her attempted meditation, Alison grabbed her phone from her pocketbook. Was she allowed to have it off airplane mode at this point? It didn't matter. She needed to order her drink now so it would be ready by the time they reached cruising altitude.

Scrolling until she found the in-flight app, she entered her seat number and tapped the "beverage service" button. Swiping up until she found the gin and tonic, she grumbled when she saw the \$16 price tag. They were clearly hurting for revenue. A shriek from behind made her wince. Hefty price tag or not, she was getting that drink. She entered her credit card information from memory and touched the "order" button.

Disabled until after takeoff lit up the screen.

Seriously? Weren't they already in the air? She refreshed the app and tried again. Same response. Ridiculous. Closing her eyes with death grip on her phone, she attempted some deep breathing exercises. Apparently those exercises weren't made for these types of airplane rides.

She tried counting to 100, visualizing the numbers in her mind. Nope—didn't work either. When she opened her eyes and looked out the window, they were already above the clouds. Finally. She unlocked her phone and pressed the order button again.

Disabled until after takeoff

What the hell, Heartland Air Express? How much higher did they need to go before she could simply place an order for a drink? Putting her phone in the seatback pocket, she unbuckled again and looked behind her. Maybe if there were any flight attendants around, they could help her. She spotted Susan walking back and forth in the galley. Perfect.

"Excuse me, sir," she said to the man pretending to sleep in the aisle seat as she crawled over him. *Jerk.*

Her ears felt better once she was behind the projection of the child's intermittent screams. By the time she made it to the galley, and the hope of a stiff cocktail, her heartbeat slowed as well. Leaning on the bathroom door, she called out to the flight attendant who was still pacing.

"Hey, Susan." No answer. Taking her earplugs out and slipping her mask below her chin, she called again. "Susan!"

The woman stopped abruptly and eyed Alison.

"Ma'am, you shouldn't be back here. The captain still has the fasten seatbelt sign on."

"Yeah, I saw that, Susan, but we're not really near the ground. And you're back here roaming around, aren't you?"

"Ma'am, what I am doing should not affect your ability to follow the rules for your own safety. And please make sure your mask is covering your mouth and nose. It's for everyone's safety. Now, please return to your seat and fasten your seatbelt." Her voice was no longer bright. Alison imagined Susan at one of those green-peace protests she read about in the news. The flight attendant would fit in perfectly with a sign saying "Protect all life!" and a picture of a crossed-out fishing hook with a dead worm on it.

Alison flashed a smile before sliding her mask back up. "Okay, I understand. I just really needed to get that drink and the app isn't working."

Red cheeks of frustration peeking out from under the polka dot mask, Susan's voice grew firm. "I will bring you a gin and tonic as soon as the captain turns off the fasten seatbelt sign. Now, if you'll please go back to your seat, you should not be up unless it's an absolute emergency."

“Thanks, Susan,” Alison said with a wink, pleasantly surprised that the flight attendant remembered her order. “I’m just gonna pee first,” she pointed to the door she was leaning against, “and then I’ll see you back at my seat. 28B in case you forgot.”

“Ma’am, you should really wait to use—”

“I know, but it’s an emergency.”

Without waiting to hear if Susan had a response, Alison slipped into the bathroom and locked it. Taking a breath as she stuffed her facemask and earplugs in her pocket, she realized she could hardly hear the child’s screams. Her shoulders dropped away from her ears and her jaw relaxed. Maybe she should have gone to the bathroom sooner.

Feeling half-guilty for telling Susan that she had a bathroom emergency, she resolved to at least try and go. The lid on the small, plastic toilet felt flimsy in her hands, but it was surprisingly clean. Opting to sit down instead of hovering, she pulled out one of those useless wax papers that’s only purpose was to ease her mind rather than actually protect her from any germs. She sat down far longer than she needed, relishing in the last moments of peace before returning to the chaos. But as she was enjoying the freedom of being mask and buckle free, her newfound serenity was ripped from her like a Band-Aid. With a gasp, she felt the floor drop below her feet, her head nearly hitting the ceiling. For a split second, she floated above the toilet before coming down with a thud and jerk to the side.

“Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking,” the announcement came louder than in the cabin. “We are experiencing a little unexpected turbulence, so please continue to remain seated with your seatbelts fastened. Flight attendants, please be seated.” A *little* turbulence? Captain must have been smoking something. She might as well have been in a spaceship the way she just floated.

Bracing herself with one hand on the wall, she tried to stand up as fast as she could. With the other hand pulling up her pants, she slipped when the next bump hit. Clenching her jaw, she closed her eyes as her right arm slid into the unflushed toilet.

“Are you serious!” she didn’t care who heard her. Being covered in her own piss wasn’t worth taking lightly.

The turbulence continued. As she squatted next to the toilet, she found enough balance to pull her pants up with her clean hand. Without fastening them closed, she inched her way to the sink and turned the faucet on. It was always a wonder why nobody could manage to invent a more efficient sink on an airplane. Scientists could create a 300 ton shuttle of steel to defy gravity, but they couldn’t figure out how to make its faucets stream more than a trickle of cold water?

The jolts slowed to shudders. She wasn’t out of the clear, but at least she could try to get some of the urine off her arm. Opting for the sanitizer instead of soap, she pumped a few squirts over her arm and hands. It probably still smelled nasty, but she needed to get back to her seat in case the ride got any rougher.

Taking a moment to button her pants while leaning against the wall, she opened the bathroom door. Susan’s eyes burned into hers with an I-told-you-so look, the attendant’s perfectly poised body safely buckled in her seat. *Bitch*. Still dripping with hand sanitizer, Alison looked away before having to deal with any scolding comments. As she stepped into the aisle, the floor of the plane once again fell out from under her. This time, the plane tilted so far that she fell backwards. Startled shouts from the passengers rang through her ears as she landed on her butt in the galley.

“Are you okay?” Susan’s concern seemed genuine.

“I’m fine, Susan.” But before Alison could pick herself back up, the flight attendant unbuckled herself and pulled down the jump seat next to her. Half disgusted at the thought of sitting next to her, Alison stayed on the ground. “Aren’t you supposed to be seated? You know, for your safety?”

“My job is to ensure everyone else is safe as well.” Another jolt. “Here,” she said, bracing onto her seat. “Buckle up here until it’s safe to return.”

“Are you sure this is part of your protocols?” her half-skeptic, half-cynical response was ignored.

“Please put your mask on and sit down.” Susan’s voice returned to the firm, irritated tone it was before.

“Yes, ma’am,” Alison replied in a southern accent.

Without saying anything further, Alison pulled herself up to the seat, buckled in, and pulled the black cloth out of her pocket. Not an ideal situation—sitting next to the Protocol Nazi, but it sure beat falling face-first on some stranger while trying to stumble back the few rows to her seat. And considering how the plane was moving, she most likely would’ve ended up with her urine-soaked arm in someone’s face. She winced at the thought.

Looking around at the prepackaged snacks and beverages, her eye caught a glimpse of a crate with some plastic bottles of wine in it. She was nearly within arm’s reach, and if she could just get to it, maybe she could slip a little something while she was there.

Looking next to her, she noticed Susan’s eyes closed. It could be perfect timing. Without unbuckling her seatbelt this time, she stretched her arm forward, her fingertips nearly touching the side of the crate. So close, if she could just inch a little bit further...

“Ma’am, please!” It was the first time Susan had raised her voice.

“Alright, Susan,” she said, annoyed. “Ya caught me!” She added a fake giggle to ease the tension. Susan was not amused, but instead of giving her a lecture on safety, she returned to closing her eyes. Maybe she was trying to visualize a deserted island too, probably away from Alison.

A series of small bumps followed by a large sway to the side caused more commotion from the passengers. Bracing the sides of her seat, Alison glanced over at Susan, whose eyes remained pressed tight. She, too, was bracing the side of her seat, but only with one hand. The other one, instead of holding on for stability, cradled a barely-there bump on her stomach. Realizing the true reason Susan’s eyes were shut, a wave of guilt rushed over Alison. And as the plane dropped one more time, Alison’s heart did too.

“Hey, Susan!” she tried whispering over the roaring engines and clanging crates, but her voice was more of a shout than she intended. The flight attendant’s eyes opened, startled. Alison looked into the baby blues of an overwhelmed young girl. “How old are you?”

“What?” she asked, confused.

Alison’s tone grew calmer. “I was just curious how old you were.”

“I, uh, I just turned twenty-one last month.” Her voice quivered as the plane shook some more.

Closing her eyes herself, Alison thought about the first time she stepped foot on the streets of Manhattan at that age. The same feeling of fear and excitement came back, remembering what it would be like to start a new life away from everything she’d ever known. Besides being well-versed in how to please her mother and future husband, she was clueless. And throwing it all away when she saw Time’s Square was a moment she would never forget. It

was the first time she felt free. But the grief and sorrow of remembering why she fled there in the first place, came back with it. She swallowed the memory and turned to Suzie.

“And how far along are you?” Alison asked.

“What? Can you tell that—” she started, looking down at her mid-section.

“I can’t. I mean, I can, but it’s not noticeable. I just know the look—the feeling of wanting to protect everything. Every woman who has ever been there knows it.”

Susan looked away, contemplating. Through the silence, Alison recalled the first and only time she felt what Susan was feeling now. The moment she heard that heartbeat on the ultrasound, she felt the closest thing to pure love and purpose that she had ever experienced.

“By the way, I’m Alison.” She didn’t bother reaching her hand out, remembering the incident with the credit card.

“Nice to meet you, Alison.” She paused. “I’m about three months, and nobody knows.” She made eye contact. “How many kids do you have?” Her tone was no longer dictating, but that of a curious child.

“None.” Tears welled up in Alison’s eyes as she suppressed the urge to cry, reliving the last month she spent in Georgia before moving away. She could still smell the gynecologist’s office, feel the cool jelly on her stomach, and hear the whooshing of her unborn baby’s heart. But the overwhelming love was soon overshadowed by the fear of what her mother would say when she found out her daughter got knocked up out of wedlock. The shame covered her again as she recalled the family meeting where her mother demanded she get the abortion because Alison was too young, too rash to be a good mother. And then the regret she would always live with for listening to them. She looked down, so she didn’t have to see Susan reaction to her next statement. “I terminated the pregnancy.” She bit the inside of her cheek, stuffing the emotions,

the same way she learned to suppress it all when she moved into the cutthroat world of sales and marketing. Nobody would see her weakness. She cleared her throat. “Southern family, ya know?”

“Yeah. I do know.” Susan’s voice trailed. Alison glanced at Susan’s ring-less hand. “That’s why I kept this job when I found out. Thought I could save up for a new life—get away from the chaos. But now I’m not sure I’m cut out to take care of anyone.”

Hearing Susan’s insecure thoughts caught Alison off guard. “What do you mean, not cut out? Look at what you’ve done already.”

“Oh, you mean like how I freak out when there’s turbulence, which is, by the way, pretty much every flight. Or how I failed to convey our safety message to get you to stay in your seat while the fasten seatbelt sign is lit?” Her snarky comment was endearing.

“Hey now!” Alison chuckled. “You got me safely to this spare jump seat, didn’t you?”

“I guess...” her eyes rolled. “It’s not supposed to be vacant, but everything’s changed with the pandemic. Nobody wants to work, but I didn’t have enough seniority to take time off. And once I found out I was expecting, I knew I needed the money.” She looked at Alison in the eye. “Please don’t say anything. They’ll make me take a leave if—”

Alison put her hand up. “I won’t. Promise.” She paused. “I was wondering why you were alone back here.”

“It’s probably for the best. Now nobody can see that I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

“Well, I think you’re doing a great job. And for what it’s worth, I think you’re going to make a great mom, Suzie.”

Though it was hidden under pink fabric, Alison saw a smile push her cheeks up. “Thanks.”

“Folks, this is your captain speaking,” the overhead chimed in again. “It seems we’ve passed most of the turbulence, but I’m going to keep the fasten seatbelt sign on for just a bit longer until we’re in the clear. Thanks for your patience.”

A wave of relief overcame Alison. She had been so focused on her conversation that she hadn’t realized the shaking subsided. “Well, I guess I can go back to my seat now,” she said to Suzie.

“Seriously, did you learn nothing?”

Alison smiled. “Okay, I’ll stay, but, uh, can I get that gin and tonic now? I’m pretty sure we’re at cruising altitude.”

“I’m not answering that question.”

“Eh, it was worth a shot.”

Alison eyed the plastic wine bottles again. The watered-down alcohol seemed less appealing than it did before. And as a man opened up the lavatory door, Alison didn’t bother trying to escape back to her seat. Maybe the Xanax was kicking in.

“So are you going to visit family?” Suzie asked in a more professional tone.

“What?” Alison turned, eyes narrowing.

“You said you were from the South.”

Alison’s face relaxed, realizing the flight attendant wasn’t either a mind-reader or a stalker. “Right, yes. I’m going to see my family.” She thought about her sisters who she cut out of her life when she moved. “Well, I’m going to see my mom.” She wasn’t sure whether or not anyone else would consider her family anymore.

“Do you visit often?”

As much as she would have like to define “often” as once every two years, when her mother nagged her enough to fly down for the weekend, she couldn’t justify giving an affirmative answer. “No.”

“Well, this must be a really special trip then.” Her voice turned up again, eager as a child going to Disneyworld.

Suppressing the urge to mock her new friend, Alison thought about her response. “I wouldn’t call it special. My mom was diagnosed with cancer last year.” The C word wasn’t something she shared lightly, perhaps because it reminded her of her own mortality. Or perhaps because she actually didn’t want to lose her mom, no matter how difficult their relationship was.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that.” Suzie put a hand over her heart as if someone just told her that her favorite ice cream flavor disappeared. But it seemed genuine.

“Thanks. It’ll probably be the last time I see her.”

“That sounds awful. Really, I’m so sorry.”

“It is what it is.” If only her stoic words could match her feelings.

Suzie nodded, still cupping her belly.

“She was the one who convinced me not to have the baby.” The words came out before Alison had time to realize what she was saying—or why she was saying it.

The day after her mother walked her out of the abortion clinic, Alison told her mom she would never be back. Maybe it was the shame, or the anger, or the hurt, but she stuck to her word for almost twenty years and still wasn’t sure if she regretted it. But when her oldest sister called her out of the blue to tell her that their mom was dying, because her mom couldn’t bear to tell Alison herself, no amount of stubbornness could keep her from saying goodbye. Even if that goodbye might be futile.

“I’m sorry.” It seemed Suzie was on a broken record of sympathies.

“Don’t be. It was ultimately my decision. I could’ve said no.” She thought about her statement and all the blame she put on her mother for decades. Could she have said no? She would never be able to find out.

“Well, I’m still sorry. I’m not sure how my mom’s going to react when I tell her—well, *if* I tell her.”

Alison remembered the moment she opened her mouth to tell her mom the news. How it took five minutes to get the first word out because she was paralyzed by fear. But then the weeping into her mother’s arms, the only confidant she had, was still comforting. She could still see the look of worry in her mom’s eyes as she, still practically a child, broke down in tears. And even if her mom made some comments that would burn in her memory forever, so would the feeling of resting in her embrace. A feeling that Alison hadn’t felt for half of her life, and a feeling that, after this trip, she would never feel again.

“You should tell her,” Alison stated. “Mothers might not always react the way we want them to, but they’re still our mothers.” She wished she could have taken her own advice before leaving home. But now, the only thing she could do was send money, as she did every month since the day her sister told her the news. And go back one last time to try to remember what it was like to hug someone she once loved more than anything in the world.

“You’re probably right. And if she doesn’t take it well, I guess I could always move to New York like you did.” Alison wasn’t sure if the comment was a jab or an admiration. She gave her the benefit of the doubt.

“Well, you probably know the city well enough now that you work for the airlines.”

“Oh, no, I’ve never been to New York.”

“Wait,” Alison was confused. “Weren’t you just in New York?”

“Yes, I mean, it’s part of my route, but I’ve never been to the city. I’ve been to the airport plenty of times, and if I have to stay overnight the airline will get me a hotel nearby, but that’s all I’ve seen.”

Alison was surprised that anyone would pass up the opportunity to explore the city, but then remembered that Suzie didn’t exactly seem like the adventure-seeking type. “Well, I wouldn’t necessarily recommend running away. Look where it’s gotten me—forty years old and too stubborn to go back home because I can’t face my family members who have all disowned me. And then, when I finally get the courage to return, I end up running through three concourses and knocking down a little old woman with a cane.”

Suzie’s expression was blank as if she was unsure whether to laugh or give sympathies again.

“Wasn’t my best moment.” Alison, once again, had no idea why she was divulging her life to a near stranger.

A double chime rang overhead as the seatbelt sign flickered off. Thankful to have an excuse to ditch the uncomfortable conversation she put herself in, Alison unbuckled her seatbelt and hopped up. “Well, I guess it’s time to get back to my seat.”

“Yes, I need to start trash pickup myself,” Suzie replied, putting on a pair of vinyl gloves. “Let me get you that gin and tonic first.” She reached across Alison to the bin next to the wine bottles. That’s where the gin was! She had been so close.

“Ya know what? I don’t really need it anymore.”

“Are you sure?” Suzie sounded genuinely surprised.

“Positive. But, uh, do you have a cellphone with you?”

“Yes, of course.” Her eyes squinted, confused.

“Let me see it.”

Without questioning further, Suzie wiped the screen with a sanitizing towel before handing it to Alison.

Alison didn’t bother waiting for the liquid to dry before she punched in her number under the contacts button. “If you ever get stuck in New York and want to see the city, I’d be happy to show you around.”

“Really? Like if I have a night there?”

“Well, maybe not a night...” she thought about being young and seeing the lights for the first time. Then shaking, alone and frightened, in her rat-infested flat when the sun went down. “Ya know what. Yeah. That would be fine. It might not be as nice as those hotels Heartland Air Express probably puts you up at...”

Suzie chuckled. “Right,” her sarcasm was getting catchier. Maybe Alison was rubbing off on her.

“You’re welcome anytime.” She pictured the southern girl barging through her door unannounced at 2am. “Just let me know a day or so ahead of time,” she added.

“Sure, of course.” She ruffled through another crate and pulled out a couple of palm-sized, blue envelopes. “Take some of these sanitizing towels for the rest of your trip. Can’t be too safe.”

Alison nodded and smiled at her relentless efforts before turning away. Pausing as she stepped into the aisle, she turned back and faced the galley. “Thanks, Suzie.”

“You’re very welcome. Would you like some more?”

“No, I’m not thanking you for the wipes. I couldn’t care less about them.” She took a breath. “Just, thank you.”

“Gee, you’re welcome. And thank you for sharing everything with me. I think you’re right about telling my mom. I’m going to talk to her when we get back.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it. Text me and let me know how it goes. And give her a hug while you still have her.” Feeling those annoying tears well up again, Alison pivoted back to the front of the plane.

“I’ll pray for you and your mom,” Suzie added before Alison could walk away. She just had to throw that in there.

Tempted to give Suzie an older, more experienced perspective on what she’d come to know about prayer, she instead bit her tongue and said, “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

Holding onto the prepackaged sanitizing wipes, Alison walked the now-calm pathway to her row. The man in the aisle seat glared at her when she returned. It had probably been pretty peaceful in her absence, even with the rollercoaster-like turbulence.

“Excuse me,” her voice commanded. He actually moved his legs for her this time.

As she sat down, she clicked her seatbelt, even if the signal was turned off. No way was she trusting the rest of the skies. Her purse and phone were where she left them. Somewhat surprised that nobody tried to snag her belongings, she remembered she was on a closed aircraft in the middle of the sky and not the city. Not like someone would be able to run off with anything. She giggled to herself at the thought.

Pulling out her phone and scrolling to the in-flight app to check out the entertainment, she decided to rip open one of the wipes that Suzie gave her. She grimaced when she saw the black from her phone’s screen smear on the white cloth. Maybe she should do this more often.

Dropping her tray down and plugging her earphones into the jack, she scanned for something to watch. Not much except some sitcom about pirates. *Great*. As she tapped the play button, the audio was minimized by the familiar, too-sweet voice coming from behind.

“Trash please...Masks up...Please make sure it’s covering your mouth *and* nose...Yes, make sure your masks are on...”

As the voice got closer, Alison mumbled to herself. “We get it Suzie,” her voice turned up to match the flight attendant’s.

“I’m sorry?” Suzie stopped. Alison really needed to work on her volume.

Feeling the other passengers’ eyes burning on her, just as she did when she was stuck shoving her suitcase into that way-too-small overhead bin, Alison gulped. “Everybody gets it,” she said while pulling out an earphone. “We all need to have our masks covering our mouth *and* nose.”

“Then I’m sure you’ll be happy to comply yourself,” she said in that same, sweet, southern drawl she had when Alison first boarded the plane. It wasn’t until she motioned for Alison to pick the fabric over her nose that Alison realized her own mask had slipped down—an actual accident this time.

Annoyed, but no longer anxious, Alison tugged it up. “Of course,” she replied as the flight attendant continued her rounds.

Then, hitting the play button on her phone, she felt the all-too-familiar tremble from behind her seat. As a red, fleece blanket flew over her head, she took a breath and paused the show once more. Unbuckling her seatbelt, she gathered the fabric in her hands. The parents winced as she turned around with their child’s comfort item.

“Here ya go.” She handed it to the dad as the mother clutched his arm.

“Thanks?” he said, still unsure.

Debating whether or not to say *you’re welcome*, she resolved that the gesture was as polite as she was willing to be. But, slightly to her surprise, the kicking legs stopped.

As Alison settled in her seat, Suzie was already heading back to the galley, still holding the almost-full plastic trash bag. Without saying anything, Alison reached into the aisle and dropped the used sanitizing wipe and wrapper into the garbage. Suzie paused, noticing the contents. For a brief moment they made eye contact, and before the flight attendant turned away, Alison noticed a smile peek out from under her mask.