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"Baggage Claim"

The plane had landed, but his stomach was still circling over Lake Michigan, the descent had been that abrupt. It still scared him a bit, even though over the years had had racked up enough frequent flyer miles to circumnavigate the Earth three times, all on the airlines' collective dime, and then take a round trip to the Moon, should a major carrier add it to their route at some point.

"That was a hell of a descent," he said to the person sitting next to him as the plane roared to a stop. "Waldo Pepper must be the pilot."

His row-mate smiled humorlessly at him.

The plane had stopped and now was just sitting on the runway.

"We are waiting for a gate to open," came the captain's voice over the intercom, "so we'll be sitting here for about 10 or 15 more minutes. We apologize for the delay."

He sighed heavily. "You know, this happens every time. It's like these arriving flights take airports by surprise. I've known about this flight for at least two months and

yet it always seems like as far as the airports are concerned, a couple hundred strangers have just dropped in unannounced."

He took the opportunity to turn on his cellphone and check voicemail.

His row-mate looked at him with an expression that seemed to say "I need to get an iPod."

After the usual wait for a gate, the plane trundled over to the jetway, docked, and the passengers began the long endless exiting process. He trudged down the jetway and across the gate past the rows of vinyl settees, and into the terminal at O'Hare. He had a three-hour layover, and he always chose one particular airline for the sole reason that there was one bar in this one terminal he liked above all others. It was a tad out of the way (to the extent that anything can be out of the way in an airport terminal—save, of course for the gate for one's connecting flight) and was always uncrowded. No mean feat in O'Hare Airport.

He sat at the bar and ordered his usual (Coors Light), took a deep, satisfying pull on the bottle, and checked his cellphone messages again.

The bar was indeed uncrowded—but then it was 10 a.m., so perhaps that wasn't that surprising. True, in an airport, conventional measures of time have no meaning, as travelers

from different time zones have utterly disoriented their biological clocks, but it seems most travelers seem to at least pay lip service to one's normal circadian rhythms, especially when it comes to the liquids that pass through their lips (coffee in the morning, alcohol in the evening). Not so our guy, who was on his second Coors Light before he had even finished checking his voicemail messages. And it was Sunday morning.

A woman approached the bar. She was in her late 30s, attractive, he thought as he looked over at her, and dressed as if she had come from the East Coast (it was January). She caught the bartender's eye.

"Yes, miss, what can I get you?"

"What do you have that's blue?" she asked.

The bartender was somewhat taken aback, this not being the kind of question he was used to being asked.

"Blue?" he repeated.

"Yes."

"Well," he thought for a moment. "I could do you a Blue Hawaii."

"Oh, like the Elvis song. What's in it?"

"Let's see...vodka, blue Curacao, creme de coconut, and pineapple juice."

"That sounds lovely. I'll give that a try. The night is young and so are we."

He leaned over as the bartender mixed her drink.

"You're an Elvis fan?"

"Well, who isn't, really?" she said. "If one could rewind the tape of life and have it play again, keeping all of evolution and the development of human culture the same, with the sole exception being that there was no Elvis, I dare say the world would be completely different and the worse for it." She paused for a moment. "But then one could quite easily think of examples of people who never existed to begin with that the world has missed."

She paused.

"I've never been a big fan, no. I'm just in a blue mood."

He tried to be sympathetic. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"No, I don't mean 'blue' as in 'sad.' To me, 'blue' is inseparable from the azure blue off the ocean in the Caribbean. Or, indeed, Hawaii. I've come from the Northeast, so I'm definitely imagining 'blue' right now. I am constant in opal."

"Where are you headed?" he asked.

"Somewhere near Los Angeles. My nephew is appearing in his school play so I'm on my way to see him."

"Wow. You must be a close family if you'd fly three thousand miles to see your nephew in a school play."

"I try to be."

He gestured to the bartender to get another Coors Light.

"You're in Chicago. How can you drink Coors Light? Goose Island is where it's at. I insist." She beckoned to the bartender. "Garçon, a Goose Island for monsieur."

The bartender obliged and he took a sip. "Very bitter. And strong."

"You're probably not used to real beer."

They sat in silence a while.

"I'm actually on my way to L.A.," he said.

"Willingly?"

"Well, I live there."

"Willingly?" she repeated.

"Well, yes, I suppose. Although, I travel so much I'm never actually there. I was in Boston for a week and I'll get a whole two days at home before I have to go to Dallas, and then on to Orlando. I may never see home again."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I suppose it's a job-dictated itinerary."

"What else? I'm the national sales manager for the Shur-Grip Stapler Company."

She looked at him blankly. "You sell staplers?"

"Yeah."

"What needs to be sold about them at this point? Doesn't, like, 99% of the human race know what a stapler does? Well, maybe with the exception of the Kalahari Bushmen, but I wouldn't imagine they have all that many things to staple. Does there need to be any reason to actually kill yourself trying to sell them?"

"Well, you'd be surprised..."

"I have no doubt."

He took no small amount of umbrage at her attitude.

"Well, what do you do for a living?"

She shrugged. "Nothing, really. I'm a painter, but I make it a point not to make a living at it. Nothing destroys the idea of art more than trying to anticipate the needs of the market."

"So, basically, you do nothing."

She shrugged again. "I wouldn't say that."

"What would you say?" He was being defensive now.

She paused for a moment, then took a hefty swig of her blue drink. "I spent 10 years on the treadmill to oblivion. You say you spend most of your life traveling. Well, what do you think I did for a decade? I eventually became senior VP for a software company. I traveled all over the place, constantly. North America, Europe, Asia. You name it. The

only thing close to a relationship I had was with lonely guys in hotel bars, same as me. I dedicated my entire life to one thing, and that was the company I worked for. And then, I heard that my mother had been diagnosed with ALS—amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Lou Gehrig's disease, basically. I tried to visit when I could, but that turned out to be fairly seldom. They don't tell you that ALS can progress very fast. I thought I had all the time in the world; I kept thinking, if I can just make it to the next milestone, I'll slow down and pay attention other things that are happening in the world."

She took a sip of her drink.

"That doesn't happen. It's funny. When you drink too much or take drugs or even have sex too much—basically, anything fun—they tell you that you have an addiction and need to stop. But when you work too much, they tell you that you are an extremely productive member of society, that you are an inspiration, that you are what America is all about, even though your life can get just as wrecked, if not more so." She paused again and took another drink. "I will never forget this. I was in a meeting. It wasn't even a particularly important meeting. But my cellphone buzzed and I saw that it was from my father...and I sent it through to voicemail." She paused again. "I sent it through to

voicemail. When I checked my messages, I found out my mother had died. That was it. I missed her entire last years. You know, I was too wracked with guilt to even want to go to the funeral, but our CEO was a decent guy and he said, 'Rachel, if you don't go, you will regret it for the rest of your life.' So I took a leave of absence...and never went back. I resolved at that point that the people in my life would be more important than anything, that enjoying life would take precedent over the pointless treadmill of accomplishing something. That I would pursue a dream rather than live a nightmare. So I moved in with my father, and we bonded in a way we never had before. I started to pursue my true love, painting, and when I need money I do some freelance illustration, or graphic design, or writing, and then stop when I've had enough."

She took another sip of her blue drink as he watched her. "And here I am. I am on my way to see my nephew in a school play, I'm drinking something blue in an airport bar at 8:30 on a Sunday morning, and for the first time in my life, I can say, 'Life is good.'"

She finished up her drink.

"Anyway, I have a connection soon, and I'm starving. It's 8:30 in the morning, so I'm thinking...steak dinner."

He smiled. "How would you like some company?"

"Sure."

They left the bar. She looked back at the bar and stopped him.

"You forgot your cellphone on the bar," she said.

"No, I didn't."

And they walked out into the terminal.