The Plane

I was a wreck when I boarded the plane. I guess everyone comes across a period in life when everything seems to be going wrong, and when no matter how much you try to cheer yourself, no matter how much you try to find beauty and hope in the world around you, all you can find is the blackest of sorrows, the ugliest of despair. There are times when everything you held close to your heart, everything you felt convinced would always stay with you has suddenly gone away, or worse, gone awry, so that all you can believe in anymore is the ruthlessness of change.

My writing career had all but finished, and the last copy of my last novel was biding out an abominable death in some remote corner in an obscure bookstore. My publisher had stopped calling me, or in any case I had stopped taking his calls. Alcohol had become more than a leisure, indeed more than a confidante, and I spent most of my waking hours trying to get drunk. My wife had left me long ago, and in a ruthless sort of way it had ceased to matter. Every morning that I woke I looked up at the rising sun and thought that this, here, was another day; a mental mark chalked out on the walls of a prison by a prisoner longing to be free, and yet fast losing hope.

I hadn't planned to take this vacation, if a vacation it was; my idle, purposeless life in front of a television and beside a bottle of beer had become rather dear to me, and I had formed an impression that seconds, minutes, hours and days would slowly count their way to the end. But my mother, shocked and troubled at my state, had gotten after me to get some “fresh air”, as she called it, and in one drunken drawl I had decided that I would go to France; perhaps because France was the only nation my mother hadn't considered.

The next day tickets to France were on my table, courtesy my mother, and so, bleary eyed with a decapitating headache I found myself in this coffin of a plane, with a not-so-cute airhostess describing to me the intricacies of blowing up my lifejacket, and a listless, stifling rain washing down the windows from the outside.

I yawned and closed my eyes, and let myself dream of good things, of how France would be sunny, and happy, and I would be inspired to write something great, something beautiful. I thought of those days, way way back, when writing was a first love, and when Jyotsna (my wife, now, or not my wife now) had remarked so very often that my eyes had in them a wonderful, divine spark. That spark was nowhere near now, and to try find it in France was like trying to find God in Timbuktoo. That analogy too, I thought, was overwhelmingly uninspired, and in a surge of disgust I let myself be absorbed again in the schizoid langor that had become my life.

I thought I would sleep awhile, but my head was aching a wee bit too much to allow me that privilege, so I let my eyes scan through the crowd around me. I do that often. Once I thought I did it because I was a writer, and there is no better inspiration than watching people go about their routine. Now, however, I had given up that illusion. I watched people because I searched in them what I had never found in my own life; or what I had found but had never cared to see.

The plane was filled, of course, with that usual crowd of urbane people whose prime occupation, I had once surmised, was simply to appear sophisticated. They looked at their watches, raised eyebrows, took out their mobile phones and went to great pains to switch it off. With the greatest of deliberation they casually threw their bags into the hold above, then sat down with a Paulo Coelho or a Chetan Bhagat to bide their precious time.

But there were others too, and my eyes drifted to that girl there far away to the left, who was
awkwardly trying to decide which bag to keep in the hold and which to keep with herself. She decided one way, and then the other, all the while wiping what appeared to be a runny nose. Her age, I guessed, was around twenty. Her tee shirt and jeans were plain, though not unfashionable, and her hair was black, and fell in curly tresses down to her shoulders.

An airhostess approached her from the back, and she turned, and I saw, even from this distance, that her eyes were red, and her face bloated, and those were tears that glistened in her eyelashes. She looked at the airhostess and instantly averted her eyes, embarrassed. She looked at the bag in her hand for a minute, then at the hold, then she closed the hold and sat down awkwardly, her back straight and one hand on top of the other.

“Have you tied your seatbelt, sir?”
This last interrupted me, and I saw another hostess pointing out to me my seatbelt, as if I had already gone senile. I tried to look annoyed, but failed to do so, and before I could tie my belt and speak something impolite, she had already moved on to another passenger.

This passenger I looked at now, and at first, seeing the impeccable tie, the creased shirt and the hair slick with gel, I almost rejected him as another of those -what were they called?-yuppies, and not interesting whatsoever. But his shoulders were slumped, and when the airhostess asked him to tie his seatbelt, he didn't respond, and continued to stare into space. She had to shake him twice before he came to his wits.

A commotion was ensuing somewhere behind me, and I craned my head to look at what was going on. It was a very old lady and she looked half confused, half frightened at something, and several stewards and hostesses were trying to calm her down. Even from here, I could guess that she was unintelligible, and none of those standing there had any idea what was going on. But whatever it was, she was visibly shaken, and afraid, and even when finally a hostess managed to sit her down, and put on her seatbelt, she clasped and unclasped her hands, and looked around, half in shock and half in terror.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is your pilot speaking ....”
I lay my head on the headrest and closed my eyes, thinking of what I had just seen.
A twenty-something girl, a yuppie, an aged old woman.

What did this journey mean? To all those who were travelling on this plane? What did it mean to me? What did it mean to the three of them?
I guess for each of us, this was in some way a journey of hope. We had gotten into this plane running away from something, or running towards something. We wanted that light in the middle of our hearts to light up again, we wanted the darkness to stop, the silence to end, the gramophone record to be reset so we could listen to music again.

Yet, could that ever happen? Could what we lost, what we were searching for, could that be returned to us, just by this one journey? Could I get back my life on the other side of this plane? This girl, her tears, the loss they spoke of, could it ever be reversed? Would she ever be able to smile again? That man, with his impeccable tie and slick hair, would it ever be possible for him to get a hold on his life again? Would there ever be another plane, another time, when the airhostess would ask him and he would smile and say, yes I have tied my belt? Would that old lady at the back ever regain that old sense of comfort, of being somewhere home, somewhere that was not so alien, not so scary? Would she ever feel sane?
I let my mind run away at random, going off at weird tangents, for I knew the answer was no. This wasn't paradise we were travelling to. This wasn't utopia. This was just another day, just another hour, and when we alighted on the other side we would carry our pains and our burdens into the new world. For those of us here who were happy, who were vacationing, in the true sense of the word, it didn't matter where they were going to. They would enjoy no matter where. But to us, of the broken heart and troubled mind, no it wouldn't matter either. It would just be another pillow to cry into.

Sleep came then, and in the confused murmur of voices I felt myself drift away, thinking of sorrows and tears that would never cease.

When I woke up, the sun had already set, and outside violet-gray clouds moved slowly, barely discernible in the black, starry background. I yawned, and looked around a bit, and was shocked to my wits to see the young girl I had noticed earlier sitting right beside me.

“Why didn't they come?” she asked, looking at me.

I wondered what to answer, but she had started talking again.

“From childhood, you know, from childhood, I have never had many friends. I never had any friends. The girls in our colony would come and call me, 'Neha, come let's play', and I would go too. But I was always somehow separate, somehow not part of the gang. I would stay there somewhere, in the periphery, hoping people would take notice of me, hoping I could be like those beautiful girls who everyone paid attention to, who everybody wanted to play with. But...but whatever I did, people got annoyed. They would push me away, ask me to stand apart till they were done. And then when they were one team member short, they would call me, and I would go.”

Someone, somewhere turned in his or her blanket. Someone else coughed. Neha sighed, then continued.

“It was the same even in school. Right till twelfth. I would be there, with all of them, with those large band of girls that was so very popular, and yet I would stand apart, yet I would be somehow invisible. People talked to me when they wanted to get their homework done, when they needed to get the class notes, and I would give it to them, because they were friends, right? Except that they weren't. When the vacations would start, all these people would go and hang out somewhere or something, and no, I would never be called, though I might have talked to them a million times, though we might have spent dozens of hours together. What did I do wrong? Why didn't they want to be with me?

“I used to be troubled then, and I got a bad temper. I felt alone, always, even when I was in the middle of a group, talking loudly and cracking jokes. Because, you see”, (she said this animatedly, in a high-pitched, vehement voice) “because they never did care about me. They never even noticed I was around. I would speak and they would carry on a conversation, but that was it. I had no friends.”

She fell silent. She bowed down her head, and her chest began to heave softly. I let her cry, because I didn't know what to say.

“Then”, she began again, looking up at me, and sniffing. “Then I came to college, and for the first year or so, it was the same. Friendless, alone, more so if it was possible. But I met Vivek and Swati then, and we hit it off famously. For the next three years, three full years, I was with them. They didn't mind me, they didn't find me strange, or someone alien to them. I could talk to them as I talked to myself; I could call them up in the middle of the night and pour out my worries to them, and they would listen, and even though they might not give me advice...it was...it gave me so much joy to tell it to them, it gave me so much joy to know that they were there for me, would be always. That is friendship, is it not? Yes it is. I cried to them, I laughed with them, I spent almost every moment of my day with them. I was....so...happy.”
She fell silent again for a minute or so. I wondered if I had ever even considered anyone as so close a friend.

“Why did they not come, then?” she asked, and this time her voice was defeated, despairing.

“I was leaving them forever. Why didn't they wish me goodbye?”

Something, something she had held close to her heart had given way. She cried now, cried aloud, the tears flowing like rivers down her plain cheeks, and ending in wet dull spots on her jeans. From far away she had seemed just another way-farer. Just another someone I could lay back and observe. But now, up close, I realised I would never want to be in her place. I would never want to fall back on someone so much, and then be left in the middle of the street of life, alone. I looked out of the window, then, because I could not bear to see her cry. My heart went out to her, and I cursed Vivek and Swati for having done this to her, and I wished, with whatever extent of feeling I was capable of, that she might somehow regain friends, that she might not so soon lose trust in friendship.

I don't remember exactly what happened right then, but suddenly the next moment I was no longer in the plane, but somewhere else. In a room, I guess, for though it was dark, I could make out a bed, a cupboard, and what looked like a chair with clothes piled on top of it. All kinds of questions kept pounding my head, but mysteriously, I knew the answer to them all. I knew that this was Neha's room, in a college in Lyon, France, and I knew that this was hardly a week since she arrived here, and even before I heard the key turn in the lock I knew it was Neha.

The door opened presently, and Neha came in, carrying a brown package in her hands. She switched on the light, and as my eyes struggled to adjust to the sudden dazzling white light, Neha spoke, as if to me.

“It's from Mumbai, dated 18th July.” She looked up at me. “That's exactly the day after I took off from Mumbai.”

“What is it?” I asked, but she had already started tearing off the brown cover. It was a leather bound book, and as she walked towards me, I read the title, written in gold lettering in a peculiar cursive style: Rebecca.

“Wow!” she exclaimed, her eyes gleaming with joy. “You know, I have wanted this novel, for so, so long. And a leatherbound novel at that! Can you imagine! I mean, this is just....wonderful!”

“Who is it from?” I asked, taking the book from her, but even before I opened the flyleaf and looked at the card inside I knew who it was from, and my heart jumped up in sudden joy:

Dear Neha

We got stuck in a traffic jam and couldn't reach the airport. I know that is a poor excuse, and Swati here is eating my head asking me why the hell we didn't start a bit early. She has a point though:)

But, we are making it up to you(I hope). No matter what happens, no matter how many times we screw up, know that you are the greatest, most wonderful friend we ever had.

Hope you like the leather-bound edition.

Love,

Vivek and Swati

* * *

I opened my eyes. Was that last a dream? The seat beside me was empty, as it had always been. I looked across at the girl, sitting where she had always been sitting. I was inclined to believe that all I had seen just now was just fiction, a writer's mind conjuring up tales to entertain itself. But somehow, somehow it didn't quite feel that way. Somewhere in my heart I knew, I knew that this was the truth, that this was what would happen. I guess at some level I wanted it to be true, for her sake, even for mine. I wanted her sorrow to end, I wanted to know that yes, there was hope, for me too, that yes, not all things in life are meant to bring tears into your eyes.
I looked out of the window again and imagined to myself clouds in the shape of mountains and rivers passing me by, even though all that I could see was one uniform blackness broken occasionally by a solitary star. My reverie didn't last long, however.

“‘My mother always loved me’.
I almost jumped out of my seat at the sound. I turned to see the yuppie, as I had so conveniently designated him, sitting beside me, and staring into space. I could have sworn that the seat was empty hardly a minute ago.
“‘I guess that is common enough, isn't it? For mothers to love their sons? But it is also common enough for sons to love their mothers. What would you tell me if I said I didn't love her much?’”
He was looking at me now, and his eyes were as full of despair as they were of guilt.
“I...I don't know”, I replied, but he ignored my answer and went on. “What was I chasing all this life? What did I want to gain? When I look back, I find that I was always working for something. I was working for grades, I was working to get into college, I was working to be popular, I was working to earn money. And I went on, and on, and on. What memory does my mother have of me? Does she remember any good time we spent together? Does she remember me telling her stories of school, or college, or office? What does she have to prove that I love her?

She was buying vegetables that day when a car hit her. She was old. Much too old to be buying vegetables. She went into a coma, did you know that? She went into a coma, and the doctors are saying that her systems are failing. That she is dying.

What have I ever given her? When have I ever talked freely with her? You know, when the doctor...he looked at me and said that my mother was probably not going to wake up ever again, you know what I thought? I thought that ‘No, mom, I have so much to tell you. So many things have happened. Please talk to me.’ I saw her sitting in the hospital bed, and caressing my head, as she always did, as I talked to her for hours on end, as I gave her memories she could live with. But she wasn't sitting, she was lying there, and she had nothing to think of, she had nothing pleasant at all to think of, and Oh God, how I cried. How I cried for just one more chance, just one more chance to talk to her. I needed her advice, I needed her thoughts, I needed for her to tell me everything was fine, everything was rocking, like she used to say when I was a child, but today I would have listened, today, everything would have been fine, if only....if only...she could talk....”

He held his head in his hands, and rocked silently back and forth. His words hung in the air. I hoped he would cry, but he did not. I looked outside the window, but I heard his voice again, and I wondered how many times I had talked freely to my mother. Somewhere in the background my mind played out a conversation I had had with her barely a week ago. We were sitting in her backyard, and she was having tea, and I was staring into space. She was telling me how drawn and weak I looked, and how much I needed a vacation. I muttered something about how I would think about it, maybe, and walked off.
I hoped to God the guy beside me could get to talk to his mother for a day.
That was when I was lost again, and the next moment I was standing on the tarmac, having alighted from the plane. The sunlight dazzled in my face, and the mid-July heat, though not as much as back in Mumbai, still made you want to rush into the air-conditioned refuge of the airport as soon as possible.
The still air was pierced by the high-pitched tring-tring of a mobile phone, and I looked to my right to see the yuppie standing beside me. He had just switched on his cell-phone, and as he looked at the number on the display, a fleeting look of fear and worry passed across his face.
“What happened?” I asked. “Hello”, he said into his phone. A pause, and his eyes were soon
incredulous, and overjoyed. “Is that really true?”

What was true? I had my answer soon.

“Mom? Mom, is that you? God, mom, you gave us such a fright, didn't you? The doctors said...that you wouldn't ....make it...But you have, you have, thank God almighty, you have. What? I am not in town, ma, right now. But I am heading back right now. I am going straight now to the booking counter and booking a ticket right back home.”

“...Ma, you know I am in France right now. Tell you what, I'll come there, and you get discharged soon, and....we'll fly out here again. And we will have a lot of fun. Just like the olden days, ma? When you used to take the two of us? To Essel World? I'll take you now. And we will have a lot of fun. I have so many things to tell you. You wouldn't believe....”

I left him there, and inspite of myself I smiled. It was a miracle wasn't it? Even though it hadn't happened yet, even though it was probably a dream. It was a miracle, and it was the best thing that could happen, and the world was still good, and the sun was still shining. I wished the world for him, I wished the world for his mother. And I wished the world for my mother too.

* * *

When I opened my eyes again, I guess I wasn't shocked at all to find the old lady sitting with me this time. An airhostess was standing nearby her, and she was explaining gently to the lady, “Ma'am you will have to tie your seatbelt.”

She just looked blankly at the airhostess, her eyes unblinking behind the million fold wrinkles that crinkled her face, her hand trembling slightly in her lap. “Ma'am”, the airhostess repeated, “The plane is landing. You have got to tie your seatbelt. Do I tie it for you?”

She reached to the belt by the side. “Lift up your hands, ma'am”.

She still stared blankly, and I lifted her hands for her, and let the airhostess buckle the seatbelt for her. “Thank you, sir”.

The old lady was looking at me. “Are you Ratan?”

I shook my head slowly, wondering who Ratan was.

“Ratan said he would pick me up. Are you Ratan? Why don't I remember Ratan?”

“Auntie, you are in a plane. Maybe Ratan is waiting in Paris?”

The lady stared blankly into my eyes. I was as much worried as I was saddened by her plight.

“Plane?”

“Yes, auntie, this plane is going to Paris, from Mumbai. And you are on it.”

“Ratan was going to pick me up. He had called me to say that. And Nandita was going to take me to the temple. They said there was a winch, you know? They said there was a winch, so I did not have to walk. I had always wanted to go there. You know, I was born there. My father was a forest ranger there, back in the thirties. We used to have a big bungalow, and there would be jackfruit trees in the backyard. And there were leeches, and snakes. And grasshoppers. Every morning my father used to call me, and we would walk to the temple. And we would walk up the entire flight of steps you know? Right up to the top. We would run, in fact. Me and my sister. We would race, and I would always win. It was all forest then. You know, my father was a forest ranger? He had this mahout. Manikam, his name was. He would let me ride our elephant. It was a huge elephant. And so very gentle...”

Her eyes twinkled in this recollection of a forgotten era. I did not know what to say. I guess she was happy, in some sense of the word, living in that world, but for some reason my eyes had started to water. I averted my eyes, looked out of the window, but she still kept talking, her voice quivering, barely audible over the general murmur of passengers waking up and preparing to alight. I should listen to her, my mind told me, but some part of me was revolted by the fact that she had been left alone in this plane, that at this time of her life there was no one with her. I looked at her again,
speaking as animatedly as her slow, deliberate speech would allow. I wondered if some day I too
would end up thus, lonely and without anyone to care about me, living in a time that was no more,
that was well past no more.

The plane taxied to a stop and I held her hand. “Auntie, the plane has stopped. I guess we should
alight now. Ratan might be waiting for you.”
“Yes, Ratan said he would come.”

And again I was lost, and again I was with her again, the old lady chattering beside me as we walked
into the airport foyer. She was talking now of her marriage, and how her in-laws had treated her.
“Dadima, are you okay?”
I looked by my side. A young woman, in her thirties had walked up to us. “It's me, Nandita”.
“Oh, but I thought Ratan was going to pick me up”, the old lady replied, looking at me.
“No, Dadima, that is not Ratan” Then to me, “Sorry sir. We didn't intend to send her alone, but we
never got the tickets. I hope she wasn't any trouble.”
I was about to say something, but the old lady had started talking. “Nandita, how old you have
come! I always thought you were twelve years old.”
“That was twenty odd years ago, Dadima. Now come with me. We have to go home.”
“Home?”
“Yes, Dadima. You remember we shifted here several years ago? No? But it is an awfully nice place
Dadima, and everybody is here. There's Neeraj...”
“Did Neeraj find his pencil box?”
“But of course he did, Dadima. It was lying under his table all the time. But now he doesn't have it.
He is old too, Dadima, and he works now. But he and Karthik and Ratan still play football....”
“Did Ratan get his hair trimmed? He had awfully long hair.”
“Yes, Dadima. He has wonderful hair now. They are straight, and short, as you always wanted it to
be, remember? And did you know he has married?”
“He got married?”
“Yes. And his wife is beautiful. You would love her. You know her name? No? Her name is....”
Nandita held her gently by the arm and walked her to the exit. I looked at them as they walked
slowly, talking, catching up.
It was good to know you were wanted. It was good to know someone cared.

I stood in the foyer there, looking at the sun shining outside, feeling it shine inside. Life was good,
life was beautiful. How could I not be inspired by it? I found myself coming back. I felt the blood
flow through my veins again, red and warm and alive. I felt my heart start to feel again, and that
great feeling, that of being one with life, with God, that feeling that had once inspired all my
writing, made me fall in love; that which I had lost so long ago, too long ago to remember, I felt it
come back. I looked at the sun, and breathed in the air, and smiled.
Yes, I would be back again.
I switched on my cellphone, and called my mother first.

I woke up, and there was a terrible pain in my right leg. In front of me a harsh white light dazzled,
and I screamed in agony as what seemed like a sword cut through my leg.
A doctor's face peered over.
“No, stay back. Calm down. It will end soon.”
What dosage of the anaesthetic did you give him?
---ml
Why the fuck is he awake then?
“Where am I?”
“Calm down. It's okay.”
“I was in a plane....”
“The plane crashed. Don't worry, you survived. You will pull through.”
“But...Neha....that man....they need to know....”
*Inject the fucking thing. Hold the bleeding.*
“Did they survive?”
“No one else survived. You are the lucky one.”

A drowsiness was fast enveloping me. I saw Neha again, saw *Rebecca* in her hands. I heard the man talk on the phone to his mother, overjoyed and incredulous. I saw Nandita put her arms around the old lady and walk her to the exit. I saw myself smiling at the sunshine. I saw all that would have been. Should have been.

I saw myself, shouting at my wife as she slammed the door behind her. I heard my silence as my mother asked me to take a vacation. I saw the telephone ringing and a bottle of beer in my hand. I saw me as I would be again, as I had always been.

I heard the doctor's words again as I drifted away into oblivion:

“*You are the lucky one*”. 