Confetti

by Brett Garcia Rose

Seat 3C, Aisle

The night before my flight I lie to everyone, sitting in the back of a wine bar as Lauren hefts his tongue into my mouth, vaulting it slug-like over my teeth and arching it inside like a flashlight in a cave. He digs and explores and I pull back, leaning and fidgeting in my chair. It is a hypnotic, frustrating rhythm.

A grandfather clock swings on the wall behind him and pulls me along with it. The check lies flatly on the table. Gassy water sparkles in little pops. My phone buzzes and blinks. I wonder how much lipstick I have left. I wonder how much longer Lauren will sit here with his lukewarm tongue inside of me.

Soon enough our lives suck us out of the restaurant. Lauren kisses me goodbye and takes a cab uptown. I walk down. The air is cold and feels good on my bare legs. After a few blocks I get a text from Evan. Almost done packing, it reads. *Can you pick up some milk?*

I stop outside of our building and bend down next to an idling black Mercedes sedan with an older woman sitting in the passenger seat texting on a phone with a pink cover. I kneel down on one knee and stare at her through the tinted glass, reapplying my lipstick in shiny red arches. The woman doesn't look at me.

Later in bed I cannot sleep, tangling in the down comforter and cursing to myself as Evan murmurs in his dreams. At around two I get a text from Lauren. It reads, *you were amazing*.

The only way to deal with these types of people is to hate them and to go back to sleep.

But I don't. I stay awake deep into the morning, the words lying on my white silk pillow like dirt. As the sky lightens and I listen to Evan's steady breathing in the bed next to me I wonder how I got to this place, where the slide began. Some specific detour in a long line of miniature mistakes, some road I took and was too tired or too

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excited to turn back. I want to find that moment, and I want to correct it.

I loved Evan, once.

In court earlier today I smiled as the judge read his verdict. Everyone loses but me. Things are cut in half, and no matter what the size, half of something is less than everything, and what people refer to as forever is parsed out and scavenged by the courts, and by me, and by the greatest enemy of all; by time herself.

A divorce lawyer is never really married. We know how it ends so we save something for later, holding back some small part of ourselves where we think it will remain safe. We corral our new life into this model, idling down two roads, happy and distracted, not knowing what we know. But it never lasts. All of us, we seek pain. We hunger for it. We find it.

That small part we hold back is who we eventually become.

What I need from Lauren is his need for me. Sex, like eating or bathing, develops its own efficiency at the cost of intimacy. When I go to the supermarket, I don't browse. I already know what I want, where to get it and how much it will cost. In bed I become mean and efficient, my body taking over and dishing out the eloquence of my passion in sloppy, business-like efforts. Naked, I know what I want. I know where to get it. I know how much it will cost me. Lauren plugs a leak and keeps my marriage from crashing, but each time I get a little smaller. Each time I sink, a little deeper.

I still love you, Evan says yesterday, like the first day we met. He says it without looking at me, leaving the words on the table for me to collect later. But I don't. They sit there and they wait, baking into the wood, sifting into the dirt of lies and compromises until everything is covered in its bitter paste.

Sex is not love any more than methadone is heroin, but an end-stage happiness junkie will snatch it up in a second. It's not cheating. It's surviving.

Sometimes I think love is a tiny island in a great roaring river. You either hold on or you don't. You swim and you drift and love just dissolves. Once it lets go, you rush off, alone. You twist and

spin and make inconsequential corrections, sometimes for years, until you land in the very same place you began from and convince yourself it's new.

I'll love Evan again someday. All that changes are the names.

The flight to Miami the following morning is a blur of first class martinis, of sarcasm and waiting and bickering and anger. Sera is difficult, I've barely slept, and Evan is polite and tentative in a way that infuriates me, and the guy across the aisle from me is a watcher. I can feel him staring at me. When I stand up to use the rest room, he struggles out of his narrow seat and follows me, creating pretend coincidences like men do. Everyone wants me. No one wants me. I hover and pee and when I stumble out of the little room he's right there, stopping me, telling me I'd be so much more beautiful if I smiled. He stands blocking the aisle, pleased with himself and his small bravery, handing over these words like a gift of feathers floating on his stale breath, and it's all I can do to not to punch him. He may as well call me mean and ugly. I smile and slide around him, duck-walking back to my seat in the turbulence, back to my husband and to Sera and to another form of turbulence.

Seat 3B, Center

Dear God. My class assignment for Monday is to write a letter thanking you and telling you what I think of the world you have created. I know you don't know me, I don't talk to you like some people do, but I'm here now and writing to you. My parents have been fighting a lot, mostly about the world, but I think it's really about each other. They watch the TV and say how bad everything is and how much worse it will all get and how there is no hope. They fight about money and work, about what my dad is gonna do and when he's gonna do it. It's like they stopped liking each other. I do that too sometimes, with my friends, and I don't know why. I think there's just something wrong with us that you need to fix, that you might have been too busy to notice. I think you've done a good job, mostly, but there are a few things I'd change if I were you. I'd make people be nicer to each other. I'd make people love each other and never fight, even when they don't agree. I'd like to

see people sit down together on the couch and hug and try to understand each other instead of yelling, instead of slamming doors and breaking things and crying and running away. There's no reason to hate each other and to be so mad but we are, and it isn't right.

Also, I know you're gonna take my Nana soon, and that's ok I guess. She's tired and I don't think she wants to be here anymore. So I'll make you a deal. I'll let you have Nana if you do something for me, and since I never asked you for anything, ever, you should do it. I want you to make my parents love each other again. You can use them to see how it works, and it will work, you'll see, and the world will be a better place, and then you can do it to everyone else and the world will be an even better place.

I guess that's all I have to say for now. The plane is bouncing a lot and it smells funny, like someone's cooking something bad.

Seat 3A, Window

Cara's going to leave me after the funeral. I spend my time waiting, and remembering. Love does not die out like people say. The aging of love is a stripping away of its senses. The vision fails, and love cannot see. Then goes the touch; love cannot feel. Love loses its hearing and love hides and does not know what to do. It is a weakening, a fading back into the source. Love dissolves into hope, and hope is a dangerous, reckless thing, lying in wait like a predator, hiding in its cave for some new defenseless opportunity to drift into its arc.

In the end, love is dementia.

Cara used to live inside of me and take up my best space but I can no longer feel her. I can only see her from the outside, the silhouette of a familiar stranger. And I remember now all those small turns filled with choices unmade or made wrong, all those places where I could have turned it all around but didn't, believing always that there was more time, that she would wait until I finished some small inconsequential thing in a life filled with small inconsequential things.

We all want more.

We are a machine of flesh and hope now, of promises and routines and transparent barriers described into our days in a dead language we no longer care to decipher. We are a machine spinning out, drifting finally to a slow stop until the time comes when we just fall over, when we gather what's left and walk the rest of the way. And I can feel that time coming, that final moment, that last sad look, the clarity and sadness of things forgotten as we walk out in our separate shells, bewildered and waiting to be rescued.

Love is a race car that does not wait, piloted always by the incompetent, by the distracted, by the safe, by the forward-looking and the ever blind.

I lean over in my seat and press my head against Sera's curls until she looks up. She smiles at me, our foreheads touching, but I can see our sadness written on her face, and this gives me the strength to swallow my pain and my pride. As she turns back to her game I wonder what she'll learn, who she'll become. I see Cara in her, in her strength and temper and beauty, but also I see me. She is the best of both of us. What we hope to be and wish we were, and what we might have become in another, more perfect world. Through Sera we get to be more than we ever could have alone.

Cara has her first martini shortly after takeoff as she flirts with a guy across the aisle. The seatbelt light is on, the plane thrashing and bucking, but when she gets up to use the rest room he follows shortly after. I married a beautiful woman and I'm flattered when men make a run for her, but it's also disheartening, seeing strangers get the best of her now, the part that I had and lost, the part that will go on without me, to new places.

I watch her go as I always will.

Hours later as we cross the Atlantic the flight attendant informs us that we may need to divert to another airport. She doesn't say why, and the plane begins descending in jerky fragments, flung downward like a wet feather.

I look over at Cara, lost in her sad thoughts and more beautiful even than the day I first saw her, stranded at a turnstile with a faulty Metrocard, and I let her in, with me, in every way.

The Galley

I had a roommate in college who used to cut herself. We would see the faint scars on her arms and inner thighs and say nothing. Then one night we were walking home from a party and all very drunk, and someone asked why she cut herself. I swear I thought she would freak out and deny it, would get angry and indignant, but instead she just smiled and rubbed one of the scars. “People always assume that I am addicted to the pain, but they're wrong,” she said, staring straight ahead and smiling, her eyes glossy in the reflected streetlights. “I'm not addicted to pain,” she said. “I'm addicted to healing.”

I sit strapped into my jump-seat in a pressurized aluminum tube knifing unnaturally through the skies, cheating time zones and racing ahead of life and all I can think is this: we're all addicted to healing.

Maybe that's why we hurt each other so much.

I told Jared about the baby last night and I feel worse for it, even less sure. When he asked who the father was there was a hurt slamming through me that I never could have imagined possible, a black weight crushing me. I cried for hours and screamed myself to sleep. This morning after securing the cabin and falling asleep against the galley counter, I asked myself the same question over and over.

Do I really want a baby as horrible as me?

Only the five of us hear the alarms. Steve sounds nervous as he announces the malfunction, which is pilot-speak for everything you don't want to say, for nothing anyone wants to hear. The words fling themselves out of the recessed speakers like wasps.

After the announcement there's a time lag before the fear sets in. People are at first angry, then bewildered, then helpful and comforting to one another, and finally they become cruel, mean and selfish.

We crash so we can live.

Steve says there's enough time, that it's a controlled descent, but he doesn't sound so confident. It's simple math, really, but that

math sits atop unpredictable mechanics. Whatever happened down below, we don't really know. And what will happen in the next 20 minutes before landfall? We don't know that, either.

A fire on a plane slinging itself towards the ocean, well, there's nothing good about it.

Steve's words stream out of the speakers and spread through the cabin like confetti. We're not going to make land. Just before clicking off he pauses, and the passengers all stare at the cockpit door. No one breathes.

“The exits are clearly marked,” he says.

All these people, sad and angry, bewildered, finally mean and cruel and selfish. In the end everyone wants to stand up, when it's too late. Everyone wants to be somewhere else, be someone else. Always, too late.

I decide to keep the baby. I decide to stop running. There are places in the world, I think, that don't hurt so much. Places where I can sit in the sand with the sun on my face and warm salty water sliding over my feet, next to someone I love. Anyplace but here, this fragile little tube, reaching and screaming over the whitecaps like a proud, dying thing, trying to leap over one last wave and reach land, any land.

The Cockpit

Control passes me off to the coastguard. I know what that means but there's nothing left to say. All I can do is pull into the wind at the last minute and try not to pitch. We can survive a water landing; it's been done before, even in the chop. But the swells worry me.

We watch them coming at us, graceful, angry things, pushing ahead their foamy white tips like claws. I try to measure the space between them and find a workable rhythm but it's chaos. I think of Lily behind me, strapped into her jump seat, scared. She rubs her belly. She tries not to cry.

The voices don't help so I turn off the alarms. Bill continues with the radio, keeping busy and distracted. The controls go softer. We float downward in roller-coaster humps.

Bill is 28 years old, and scared. I'm older, and more scared.

At fifty feet, I feel closer to heaven than I ever imagined I could. Bill instructs the passengers to assume the crash position. We're going in. I see the crests in the full moon, the angry foam tips grasping upwards for us. The spray coats the windshield, and then there's nothing left to see.

We go in gently at first, skimming over the first few swells and dropping speed, but then we pitch hard, tail over. The windshield holds. I think of Lily. I think of the baby. And I see my life.

Miami-Metro Hospital, Room 201, Intensive Care

The nurses dressed me this morning. It's the first time I've been in anything other than a gown in months, and it feels better than I thought it might have. Cara and Sera should be here soon, with Evan. Last night was the worst yet and I worried that I might miss them, but morning came, and I'm still here.

I don't have much time left and I do want to see all of them, to say goodbye properly. It's a strange thing, getting old, peaceful in a way I never expected. What happens is this, and it's hard to explain but I'll try. What happens is you separate from your body. You watch it tire and fail, and it's a little sad and a little frustrating, sometimes even angering. It's like when we broke down in the car on the way to Pennsylvania so many years ago, Frank and Cara and I, broke down and just sat in the broken car, sticking in the plastic seats and watching the heat curl off of the blacktop as we waited for someone to come along and help us. It's just a different kind of time, the waiting.

It's sad to see Evan and Cara, to see the arrogance of their youth, the way they waste time like it is in endless supply, like they can just go to the store and pick up some more when they run out. But you can't do that. You can't. Trust me on that. When you run out of time, you can't fix anything. All you can do is to wait, wait for that next thing to come along while you sit in your broken body, wait for whatever it is that comes and moves you out of the way while everyone else races by.

The nurses huddle outside my room in a small cluster watching television, some new tragedy got hold of their attention. It's always the same thing, the news, and they don't show me anything I'd care to see. We live in a beautiful world, every second is another wonder, but all they show is the worst bits. And now, at the end, not knowing where I'm going, not knowing what else there may be, no, they can't help me. No one can.

I lie in bed listening to the nurses whispering and conferring, and all I can do is to wait. I look at the door, and think; it's nearly time. One of the nurses, the young one with the pretty black hair, talks into a phone and looks at me with a sad smile and hooded eyes. No one feels good in a place like this. No one wants to die.

I smile at her and my eyes wander upwards, watching the red exit sign above the door. The nurse looks away. Death hovers at the end of my vision like an old lover standing behind airport glass. All of us, racing through life. All of us, waiting.

I watch the sign. I smile. And I wait.