

Story to Forget

by Michael J. Maguire

The white Boeing 747, all three hundred and sixty eight seats of it, prepared to depart from Johannesburg Airport. Mild conditions on a clear flight path coupled with the soothing voice of the first officer didn't allay my unease. I offered a friendly nod to the gentleman with whom I was about to share the flight. Tall, late thirties, dark haired, he removed his bright suit jacket and placed it in the overhead compartment before sitting in the seat next to me. He proceeded to cover his knees with a laptop. Had he acknowledged my attempt at communication? Had my nod gone unnoticed, should I try again? Wait! Was this man oblivious to me by choice, conditioning, condescension, character? Maybe I was just finding it hard to readjust to immersion in first world ignorance. I decided to attract his attention by coveting the middle armrest, an air cabin maneuver that never fails to create some communication controversy. I held an A5 hardback notebook in my left hand and used it with the full reach of my left arm to make a rather pronounced occupational move, ensuring full coverage of the entire arm rest. He turned slowly towards me. He examined the contents of my eyes before he offered a comment: "A thirteen hour flight in economy may not be the best way to get to know a person, particularly when we'll have to share that single arm rest, my name is Richard, Richard Parker, I'm a writer from the UK." He juggled with his live laptop and held out a hand in friendship, I shifted my pen from right hand to left and rose forward just a little from my seat to shake his hand. His grip was firm but not intimidating, his smile sort of incongruous, a smack of *professional* about it. I nodded again, this time he responded with an almost mirror like gesture of his head. This guy was professional and then I noticed... he'd just taken possession of the arm rest, his right elbow strategically positioned on the center of its length, cleverly denying access to either side.

I was merely in the gateway to the first world, and already I was preparing to engage in a squabble over a fucking armrest that didn't belong to either of us.

"Leaves to the ground, such is the faith of men, so says Bill Clinton's and one of my favorite writers Richard." I ventured in a friendly tone, something approaching a verbal olive branch. The head stewardess in her wisdom picked that exact moment to start telling us about the safety features of the Boeing 747 four hundred. The crackling announcements drown out my verbal attempt at congenial insight.

Richard soon stopped typing. I wasn't sure why. He closed his laptop and removed his arm from the armrest. I resisted occupying it with mine. As the announcement continued, Richard sat upright in his seat, pulling his safety belt tight around his waste with his right hand. He hesitated before returning his arm to our contentious armrest, pausing, looking to check if I had occupied it. I hadn't, you can't quote Marcus Aurelius to someone and then get petty about some stupid piece of airline furniture, even if your quote went unheard.

The stewardess came along checking out crotches. She was tall, blonde, German, good looking despite, or perhaps because of, her layers of facial make-up. She leaned over Richard and pointed to an empty water bottle I had brought onboard from the departure lounge. I handed it to her. Richard fired off his professional smile in her direction, she immediately responded with an equally practised professional grin. Her mouth became friendly with just the hint of suggestion, subtlety seductive without any explicit expression. Richard adjusted his smile accordingly. Our Aircraft was still in the middle of ground operations, we were taxiing towards our departure runway when the announcements finally ended with garbled words about a pleasant flight. The human noise levels in the cabin dropped and the co-pilot told the cabin crew to 'take seats for departure' we sat on the runway awaiting our go. The main lights went out and the cabin crew disappeared from view.

“My current favorite is the Canadian author Yann Martel” I think Richard said to me just as the engines roared into full throttle. We were off, speeding down the runway at five hundred kilometres per hour. If you want to get close to hearing the deafening rotary power of modern jet engines then sitting behind the engines in economy is the next best thing to an industrial aviation test laboratory.

“I'm fascinated by his current search for a holocaust metaphor” interrupted Richard. I turned my head, I wasn't ignoring him, just drawn to the South African landscape whizzing by my window. As we rose from the ground, the landscape proper came into view, my heart joined the engines in an emotional spin. Faces, places, feelings from the past four weeks all intruded my senses and jockeyed for mental attention. I felt tremendous guilt and despair. Richard's word holocaust reverberated in my body and it launched my brain into a retrospective assault on my senses. Initially came the foolishness and fear of my first dark night, not coming to terms with an extraordinarily uncomfortable bed. Lying in the dark, trying to frame a complaint that wouldn't make me sound like a princess on a pea, wondering if a reality TV camera had been hidden in the gloom of the airport hotel wardrobe, part of some subversive test of my European sensibilities or conviction. That was before I understood what actual discomfort was, what easy bedfellows genuine hurt and deprivation become. Before my digestive difficulties, the stinking water absurdly called fresh, the wanton disregard for human life, the deficiency, the loneliness, my mind grew sad, tugged down by my soul, dragged back to the London Mission in Tzaneen. I remembered the main building in detail, wizen walls, dull unpolished and broken floorboards, nineteen fifties metal, peeling paint, dust, decay, death. But the faces, the joy in humility, the faces, the human souls protruding through the smiles, the faces, the laughter, the crying, the faces, the wailing, the despair, the faces of the children, their tears of laughter, joy and sorrow. Their helpless little faces. My heart dragged my mind back to my first afternoon in a hut in the Limpopo region.

In the squalor, I hunkered down closer to listen, something inside me suggested it.

Gasping for breath, the small naked orphan child tried to smile at me.

Deian the matron in charge, responded to my silent query by swallowing deeply, raising her eyebrows, lowering her eyes and my threshold of hope. An involuntary reflex jabbed Forget's arm towards me, I held her outstretched hand. With her eyes open to the world, she exhaled slowly and fell silent.

A mangy stray dog barked in protest far outside the hut. The little girl they had christened 'Forget', lifeless, lay abandoned on the bed, the tattered, stained sheet, testament to her personal poverty, her pain, her only possession; isolation. The room emptied of humanity and innocence. My despair and helplessness erupted by internal anger, overwhelmed me and a rush of tears and emotion brought me fully to my knees. I grasped Forget's hands together, cupping them within my own. I searched for a prayer, a positive thought, a comfort, a control, a denial. As I moved, her head swayed to the side and rested on the mound of cloth that had passed for a pillow. Her lifeless eyes peered directly into my own, without voice, comment, judgment or accusation, she asked me why?

Deian touched me gently on the shoulder. As the matron of the orphanage in Tzaneen, she had experienced this tragedy many many times over. She was plugging a tsunami with a little finger and she knew it. I was just another asshole Irish guy here trying to put a plaster on and help hold her finger in place, another westerner waster really. I gently released Forget's tiny helpless hands. I struggled to my feet and wiped my eyes with my sleeves, I didn't want to face the other children in this state. Sister Deian asked me politely to sit on the side of Forget's bed. She knelt by Forget, gently closed the child's eyes and started praying.

Sister Deian was a member of the Australian order of nuns who came to Tzaneen in 1949. I noticed, through her prayers, she had a tear in her eye also. Just how many times can a human soul be emptied by seeing such injustice and pain? I felt empty. I didn't want

to pray, or believe, or stomach this kind of helpless pain. How many times could this loss be endured with hope.

Some days later I plucked up the courage to ask Sister Deian just that question. She smiled her friendly disarming smile.

“You know your not the first one to ask’ She pushed up her glasses with her finger and seemed to be preparing to tell a schoolboy a little about the birds and the bees. She then set off in front of me on a slow walk towards the well, her head leaning slightly to the side, told me where I should be walking with her. “Most people don't mention souls or pain, they simply ask me, how can you keep doing this, how can you decide who to help and who not to help?” She was playing with two small pieces of grass, tying them together. She continued “Many of them also tend to use the word ‘futility’ I sort of knew what it meant but I had to go and ask someone to look that word up for me after a while. Just to make sure I wasn't missing something”. Deian had been running the orphanage for over forty years, first as a straight forward missionary style orphanage but circumstances in south Africa had changed dramatically over the last number of years, her orphanage was now more like an unfunded palliative care unit. It was simply classified as an Aids orphanage, where life expectancy for the majority of the children was considerably less than ten years. I had difficulty accepting that when I'd first realized it. “You see my actions are simply guided by the principle of ‘most need’, those in most need receive what little help I have to offer, and of course I in return must ask for help from people like you”. I never before or since encountered such humility and Sister Deian warmly smiled at me through my shock. “ I have often told the story of the young boy on the beach, are you familiar with it?”. I wasn't really familiar with anything at that point, thoughts about the personification of generosity and simplicity were going through my mind at that point. “A man is walking towards a beach” Sister Deian began. “He encounters a boy, surrounded by millions and millions of starfish that have been washed up onto the beach. The starfish are struggling to hold onto life and the boy is picking them up one by

one and throwing them back to the sea. The man stops the boy. Can't you see you are merely one boy and that you can't possibly make a difference the man gently says to the boy. The boy picks up another starfish and throws it into the sea, He looks directly into the man's eyes and says: I made a difference to him."

"Of course finding a successful modern day metaphor for the holocaust has eluded many many writers, the depth of the countless tragedies, the scale of the suffering, the reality of the horrors, in many ways beyond belief, has meant that the holocaust itself defies metaphor". Richard continued to waffle about literary endeavor at a cruising altitude of thirty seven thousand feet. "His previous Booker winner, Life of PI, deals with all sorts of interesting questions, among them the idea of factuality challenging belief and imagination. My own work owes something to the same literary devices he's employed....Blah blah, blah blah, bla bla bla bla...."

Richard's words began eating him, I wondered who would remain on the beach I had just left, indeed who would tell of its existence. 'The AIDS epidemic in sub Saharan Africa' as a news phrase has already sanitized the suffering into short impersonal information bytes, its by-products easily ignorable chunks of misery: their own internal affair, undeniably hopeless situations, all pseudo phrases adding to international justifications for inaction. Three million Madeline Mc Canns each year meriting less column space than any major fashion house, how can I just passively accept this? I feel complicit in this subterfuge by not challenging it. Who really wants to hear the story of Forget.

