

Layover

by Peter Barlow

The concourse had become his second home, he knew it that well. His fellow passengers were the houseguests he couldn't get rid of, the workers at the restaurants and gift shops a personal wait staff that was starting to learn his peculiarities. All this may have been well and good, except that it meant being stranded in the Detroit airport for three days. The food supply was rapidly declining, toilet paper was being portioned out at every restroom door, and garbage cans were full to overflowing again within half an hour of being emptied. Adam stank just like everyone else not lucky enough to have a room at the connected airport hotel, from not having a hot shower for two days and he knew it.

The piped-in muzak started playing “Don't Cry For Me, Argentina.” Adam sighed. This was the first time he'd been snowed in during a layover, on his way home to Miami from a three-day talkfest in Seattle, and after two days all he wanted was to be back in the comfort of his own home. His emotions were worn down, and the sound of the song only made him feel haunted. Hearing it made him think of his failed marriage, of everything that had gone wrong, everything that hadn't been said, and how much lonelier he felt with every passing day.

Adam stood at a sink in the men's room nearest to his gate now, splashing his face with the coldest water the faucet would give him. The stubble was getting darker and more prominent, as were the black rings under his eyes. If he had known when he left Denver that there'd be eighteen inches of snow waiting at his layover in Detroit—if only he'd looked at the forecasts—he would have loaded a change of clothes in his carry-on, but as it was he was dressed for Miami, and he was stuck with the damned Hawaiian print shirt and khaki shorts and sandals he was wearing when he boarded his flight three days earlier.

Adam returned to the seat he called home and found his bag still there, leaning against the metal legs like a support strut.

Leaving unattended baggage was advised against, yes, but where would the thief go? Into the six-foot snowdrifts and the subzero weather? They wouldn't have gotten much anyway, his last maybe twenty dollars. The seat, though, was now occupied, which ordinarily he wouldn't have minded except that every other seat was taken, and had been for two days. *So much for the aid of my fellow passengers*, he thought. There was supposed to be an unspoken agreement, everybody looked out for everybody else's bags and seats, they were all in this together, except that this woman had violated the agreement. As he approached, his sense of chivalry did battle with his bad knees. Under different circumstances, he would have been more than happy to let the woman sitting there now stay seated. It was, after all, only a seat. But for the last two days, it had been his seat. His body had conformed itself to the contours of the chair. It pretty well had to; the chair was made of that hard-shell plastic that doesn't bend except under the hottest of heats.

He came around the end of the row, still thinking about what he would say to this woman, how he would say it, if he would say it. She was reading a magazine thick enough to be a phone book, and it didn't even look like she was reading it all that closely. Even from the side, her eyes had a glazed over look that suggested she wasn't reading the magazine so much as holding it in front of her. The rings under her eyes looked as dark as his own, Adam noticed, maybe darker. Her hair, a shade of auburn he found attractive in general, looked clean and fresh in comparison to everyone else in the terminal. The diamond studs in her earlobes were just large enough to spot in the right light but otherwise understated. The woman might have been appealing under other circumstances. Now she looked as tired as he felt. He came to a full stop in front of the chair next to the one that had been his own and tried to think of the politest way to ask her to move.

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Jane wasn't in much better condition. Her flight from Boston to Detroit three days earlier hadn't gone very well. Her plane had no sooner been pushed back from the gate than it was

pulling in again. One of the engines was malfunctioning, and the delay in waiting for another plane to become available guaranteed that Jane would miss her connection to Seattle. When the replacement plane finally landed in Detroit, Jane was told that there would be no flights to Seattle that night or even to anyplace closer to it than Denver on any carrier. She had little choice but to take a hotel room. The snow had only just started falling when she checked in, but she fell asleep that first night without looking out of the window or turning on the television. The appearance of a foot of snow by daybreak came as a shock, trampling what little desire she had left to ever fly again. She'd wanted to get home, back to her life, but with all that snow on the ground she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

Her time in Boston hadn't been much better. A funeral she hadn't wanted to attend but did and an argument with her daughter Cynthia cast a dark pall on the entire visit, and Jane was more than ready to go. Now here she was, neither here nor there. The upside was that, unlike the fifteen hundred or so stuck without a room, she did have a bed to sleep in, a shower to get clean in, a laundry room which she'd already made use of, and privacy. Not actually sleeping in the airport proper meant that if she'd wanted to be anywhere near her gate during the day, she'd have to stand; all of the chairs were claimed by those less fortunate than she was. She kept her eyes peeled when she was around, looking for that one single passenger to step away for a little, and she could claim the seat, rest her feet for a stretch, give it back courteously upon his or her return. She had only just sat down in an empty chair at the gate across the concourse from her own and opened her reading material, a magazine irrelevant to her everyday life except for an article on why teenage girls are so hard to manage, when above her and to her right someone said, "Pardon me, ma'am, but—"

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The words died there. He had meant to say, "That's my bag there next to you," and then take the bag. One arm was extended in the general direction of the bag in anticipation of the

act. What stopped him was the woman's eyes. They reminded Adam of Leslie's, the slight bloodshot in the corners and the bags beneath them, signs of someone not sleeping well. In the last years of their marriage, Leslie's eyes looked exactly as this woman's did. Leslie worked, always worked, always moving, always somewhere else, and when Adam was with her, Leslie's eyes showed little but her exhaustion. This woman's eyes had that too, that exhausted look, like her mind had shut off and her body was running on whatever was left over. She looked up at him, and he received the full-on effect of the vacant stare for the briefest of moments. He watched as the look on her face went from empty to surprise to guilt to resignation so effortlessly it was impossible to tell where one look ended and the next began.

She let the magazine close. "I'm sorry," she said. "This is your seat."

"No, please," Adam said. He became aware just then that his arm was still extended. He brought it back to his side under the pretense of scratching his other wrist. "I mean, yeah, but you can — I don't need it just now." Adam wondered why he couldn't finish a sentence. He was tired, certainly, not thinking straight — that had to be it. This stuttering was just another manifestation of that. "You look tired."

The woman gave a half-smile, and what power there was behind her eyes shone a little brighter. "Haven't been sleeping too well. I keep thinking how miserable it is to be stuck here, how much I'd rather be home right now."

"I'm ready to never fly again. Drive everywhere instead. At least that way you can control where you stop and for how long."

The woman nodded. "Would've if I could've."

"It isn't all bad here. I mean, hey, complimentary pretzels anytime we'd like them. Oh, wait. They ran out yesterday." Adam shook his head. "Which flight are you, then?"

She pointed to the gate across the concourse. "Seattle. Boston to Detroit to Seattle. I had the option of stopping in New York, but no, it was cheaper to stop here. And what's it doing in

New York? Nothing. No snow, no closures. I could've been home by now."

Adam looked across to the waiting area for her gate. A group of half a dozen girls, ages (he guessed) somewhere between five and nine, had taken over most of the space with a game that might have been tag or might have been rugby. They were giggling and shouting as if on the other end of a soccer pitch from one another. "I can see why you're not sitting over there."

"Bit loud. Last night I had a dream that my daughter had multiplied and grown into a gaggle of six-year-olds. They were all complaining that they didn't have enough food, they didn't like the candy bars anymore, could they have a square meal please? When my daughter was six, all she wanted was junk food. I think my subconscious is trying to tell me that if I don't have something resembling real food soon I'll go crazy."

"Well," Adam said, scratching his chin, "the Tex-Mex place at the other end of the airport still has food. I heard a guy in the men's room say so, and I was thinking of going and checking it out. You wanna—?" He stopped mid-question. There was no intention to ask her to dinner when he opened his mouth, but he found he didn't mind. This brief conversation was the best he'd had since becoming stranded. "I'm getting tired of eating alone," he said, trying to fill in the odd pause he'd started. "Gets depressing after a bit."

She smiled and stood up. "Sure. My name's Jane, by the way."

"Adam." He reached down and picked up his bag.

"What about your seat?"

"Don't worry. It isn't going anywhere."

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They were seated after a pair of squatters were asked to leave. A seat was a seat, after all, and people were staying in the Tex-Mex place for upwards of two hours after they'd finished their meals, sipping their waters as long as management would tolerate it.

Adam stirred the ice in his water and looked the laminate-card menu up and down. Most of the selections were marked through with a grease pencil. What was left over—one entrée, three margaritas, and the sweetened iced tea—were clearly the least popular options of what was usually available. Still, it was more than could be had at the stalls in the concourse, which had only sunflower seeds and energy drinks left in stock.

“The thing is,” Jane said after a few moments silence, “I don't even like Tex-Mex. But then it's either this or whatever's left over in the concourse.” She put the menu down and ran a finger through her hair. *That sentence didn't come out quite right*, she thought. Certainly it was true: she didn't much care for the style of food, but given the choice between it and sunflower seeds, she would take the Tex-Mex. But she'd completely left Adam out of the equation, and he was why she was here to begin with. Their brief conversation back at the gate was the longest she'd had with a fellow passenger since becoming stranded. And he'd seemed genuine in saying she should keep the seat she'd taken from him.

This wasn't like her, going for meals with complete strangers. Her friends back home would have said taking *any* dinner dates was out of character. But then she was very seldom approached. She looked ten or fifteen years younger than she was, but she wasn't outgoing, wasn't a conversationalist, hadn't been since the waning years of her marriage when it was clear her husband wasn't listening to her anymore, and if he wasn't why bother, right? Just shut up and look pretty when we're out, that was Jack's underlying message, and she had for a while, before discovering there was somebody else and all the grief that brought her—

“Jane?”

A lock of hair was wrapped six times around her right index finger and a waiter was standing at the table, poised and ready to “Ma'am” her until he got what he was after.

“The quesadillas, I guess,” she said. “And a peach margarita, please.” The waiter jotted it down and went away.

"Something wrong?" Adam asked. This wasn't the usual reaction he got from women. The hair twirling was new. The quiet indifference he was used to.

"This isn't like me, is all, dining with someone I hardly know," she said, looking at the tablecloth.

Adam didn't follow up on the statement. After Leslie had bundled up everything but the front lawn six years earlier, Adam shut himself off from women. He didn't think himself very attractive. He had a five o'clock shadow by lunchtime on a good day, and forever looked as if he was working on two hours sleep, ready to collapse at a moment's notice into a snoring mass of Jell-o. The few friends that stayed in contact after the divorce seldom tried to match him up with anybody.

The restaurant sound system started playing "Don't Cry For Me, Argentina" just then. Adam rubbed his eyes with one hand, pinching until he came to the bridge of his nose.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

Adam blinked and pondered the water. "I haven't done this in six years."

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The gift shops were half empty. "This is ridiculous. All I wanted was a bottle of soda," she said. The coolers were part of the half that was empty.

"They ran out yesterday. It took five security guards to keep the duty-free from getting overrun. They were the only ones left with anything to drink, even if it was only Perrier. Even the booze was gone."

Jane smiled. "That had to have been funny."

"It was, considering the guards lost. I don't think the five Japanese in there knew what hit 'em." He looked over at the magazine rack; all that was left was gardening magazines. "So much for getting something to read. All I've got in my bag is training materials."

"Oh?"

Adam opened his bag and pulled out a spiral-bound volume with the title "You, Too, Can Be a Better Salesperson" in large friendly letters across the front. "I do seminars for my company. Here for three days, there for three days, somewhere else for four days, home for three days, lather, rinse, repeat. Sounded neat in the beginning, but really it's just seeing the insides of different hotels."

"You can have my magazine if you want it."

Adam looked down at her magazine. It was one devoted to parenting issues. "Tempting, but no. Thanks, though. The bar up there may have something left," Adam said, pointing farther down the concourse. "If you're interested."

"One margarita a day is my limit," she said, turning to go. "But you *can* buy me a soda, if there's any to be had."

"Okay." He followed Jane. She hadn't rejected him yet, wished him good night, sent him on his way, back to his chair if it was even still empty. They took a bar-height table that had just opened up. There were no barstools in sight. Adam tried to keep the conversation going. "How long have you lived in Seattle?"

"Five years," she said. "Cleveland before that."

"So why Seattle?"

Jane took a long breath to give herself a moment to think, not about how to phrase her answer, but whether or not to give the correct one. She was outside her comfort zone far enough already, not only striking up a conversation with a complete stranger, but taking an invitation to dinner as well. The question had been innocently asked; her reason could have been as innocuous as taking a new job. Adam seemed nice enough, but she wasn't sure about telling him something as personal as the precise reason she'd moved so far away. She decided to take another chance, though, and hope for the best. "To get away," she said.

Adam nodded. "Other side of the country is away. That's why I moved to Miami," he said, ordering a beer for each of them, hoping she wouldn't notice the change in her beverage. "It's not

L.A. I mean, nothing is. But Leslie's not in Miami, which is fine with me."

"Ex-wife?"

He hadn't meant to say Leslie's name, hadn't even meant to bring her up, but now the topic was out there, and he thought a change of topic would only serve to end the connection between them. "We grew up together, had the same group of friends, got married right out of high school before we went to UCLA. Majored in the same thing. A few years after college, things just fell to crap. I mean, there wasn't just one moment you can point to and say, 'That's when my marriage fell apart.' It was a bunch of little things. She decided she wanted to explore her creative side. I ended up doing longer hours at my workplace. It all just drifted us further apart. We tried to reconnect, tried to do things together. We took up ballroom dancing, couples therapy, tried romantic getaway weekends. None of it worked. She went her way, I went mine."

"Mine cheated on me. Took up with a college sophomore. Had a heart attack while screwing her last Saturday. The funeral was three days ago. I only went because Cynthia wanted me to. She said it'd look funny if I didn't, never mind that I live on the other side of the country." She said it without thinking, the words spilling out of her mouth like a dirty secret. Jane looked at Adam, whose face had the same tired look as it had when they first met, no trace of judgment on it. To her surprise, now that she'd said it, she was glad she had.

Adam raised his glass in a toast. "To getting away."

Jane toasted and swallowed before realizing she wasn't having soda.

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Adam could tell from fifty feet down the concourse that the seat he'd been calling his own was again occupied.

"Sorry about that," Jane said.

"What's to be sorry about?" Adam shrugged. "It was a seat. I'll make do. Besides, we're not going anywhere, and after two

nights sleeping in those chairs, I'll take my chances that the floor's more comfortable."

"Still, you know, I feel guilty. You wouldn't have this problem if I hadn't taken your seat."

He knew what she meant, that he'd still have his seat and, therefore, somewhere to sleep if she hadn't sat there. He also wouldn't have had the dinner and the conversation that had come with it had she chosen a different seat, to say nothing of the small attraction he felt for her. Adam tried not to give away any hint that were the situation a little different he would express an interest in her, romantic, sexual. To him, all that could be was problematic.

"Don't worry about it," he said after a few seconds. Adam looked toward Jane's gate. A few of the girls were still playing. Two were splayed every which way on a couple of chairs. "What about you? Think you can find a spot where the kids won't trample you?"

"No. Well," Jane chewed her lower lip for a second. "I have a room."

Visions ran through his head: pictures of him succumbing to eight to ten hours of sleep on a mattress, of getting up in the middle of the night to use a toilet that didn't auto-flush, of shaving and brushing his teeth at a sink that didn't have motion sensors and that ran both hot and cold water. As quickly as these thoughts came, they left. It was Jane's room, her bed, her toilet, her sink. He couldn't impose, and he doubted she'd invite him of her own accord. They barely knew each other. "Come on. I'll walk you home."

"You don't have to. If you leave again, you'll have a harder time finding a spot."

Adam glanced around the waiting area, at the people, disheveled, dirty, angry, restless, bored. "I'll make do," he said.

They turned and walked slowly back toward the main hall which connected all the concourses. The hallway to the hotel was at the end of their concourse.

"I haven't been walked home in a long time."

"I haven't walked anyone home in a long time. It works out." Adam scratched his chin. "Did he ever do that for you?"

“Walk me home? A couple of times, in the beginning. He was very romantic during the courtship phase, but it didn't last.”

“It never does. Romance, I mean. Mine didn't, mine and Leslie's. It was — you know how it is. You start out all expressive and whatnot, and then as you get to know each other you get a little more comfortable, a little less showy. There are couples who still express their fondness for each other, but most of them—most of us—don't. And romance fades and love wilts and it's over.”

Jane looked over at him. She wanted to touch him on the arm, gently, and tell him, “You will go on.”

They came to a stop at the tunnel to the hotel. “Well,” she said, “it's been a marvelous evening. Thank you for dinner.”

“My pleasure. Sleep well, Jane.” He gave a half-bow, took a couple of steps backward, turned, and started walking away.

“Wait,” she said.

Adam turned back toward her.

“My—there's two beds in the room. You can sleep on the other one, if you'd like.”

He took a few steps back toward her. She looked sincerely sorry his chair was taken, but inviting him to share her room seemed like she was overcompensating. A little corner of his mind wondered if there wasn't something else behind the invitation. She hadn't seemed interested in a romantic sort of way, but he might have misread any signals she'd been sending out. *And yet*, he thought, *she doesn't seem nearly this brazen*. “Are you sure?”

Jane nodded. “It's the least I can do.”

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What am I doing? she asked herself as Adam's shower started in the next room. *Why have I brought him here? What if he tries something?* She knew—she hoped she knew—he wouldn't in the back of her head, but she wondered.

As the shower ran, Jane made herself comfortable. She changed into her pajamas, took her contacts out, and put her glasses on intending to read, but she didn't get that far. She put her head down on the pillow and dozed off before opening her book.

She was standing in the front entry to the house she and Jack shared. Through the windows she could see nothing but darkness, and the sound of crickets chirping could be heard from outside. There was a suitcase on either side of her, thick and overstuffed. This was the night she had left, a couple of hours after walking in on Jack and a co-ed naked and entwined in their bed. She could hear someone approaching, soft footfalls on the stairway to the upper floor, and a moment later. Cynthia appeared then, a girl of six, young and clueless as to what was happening between her parents. "Mommy," she said, "will you read me a bedtime story?" A thunderclap came from outside, close enough to shake the house, and the shockwave flung Jane to the ground, the soft ground, like a mattress and pillows, and the room light was on, and Adam was covering her with the comforter.

"Didn't mean to wake you," he said. "Thought you might be more comfortable under the covers."

She propped herself up and looked around the room. Nothing. No thunderstorm. No picnic basket. No proportionately accurate shrunken children in formalwear. Jane pursed her lips.

"Bad dream?" Adam said.

Jane took a moment in answering, still waiting for a version of her daughter to run into the room. "No. Not really. Not bad." She pulled herself up to a sitting position. "Did your parents ever read bedtime stories to you?"

Adam sat down on his bed and peeled the covers back from the pillows. "They weren't the type. My grandmother did whenever my brother and I went over to stay the night. She had a way of telling a story just so, and I would fall asleep somewhere in the middle."

"Would you read to your child, if you had one?"

Adam folded his hands in his lap. "I don't know. I don't exactly think of myself as an affectionate person. Did you ever read to Cynthia?"

"Never really got the chance. I spent a lot of nights working late when she was young. Most of the time Cynthia was

already asleep when I got home. Jack did, I think. She's always been a lot closer to him than me, and when we split up she didn't take it well. Well, with Jack dying last month, it's just gotten worse. So I get to Boston for the funeral and Cynthia's giving me this attitude, like Jack dying is my fault. She blames me for our marriage falling apart, so, you know, why not this too? And I'm sitting there during the service, and I can just feel everyone staring at me, or glancing out of the corners of their eyes. What's the ex-wife doing here, gloating? Then on the way out to the airport Cynthia and I argued again, about Jack, about whose fault the divorce was, things she can never understand."

Adam didn't say a word. He heard the resentment in her voice, laden across every word like a wet blanket.

"Anyway, the magazine there," she said, "has an article that says children don't feel connected to their parents due to lack of family activities. They list bedtime reading as one of the better activities. And I can't help but wonder, you know, what if."

The silence lay there between them for a long minute.

"Leslie's favorite musical is 'Evita.' I had no idea when I married Leslie how much a fan she was of Andrew Lloyd Webber. She played a recording of it quite often. Saw the movie four times the weekend it opened. She knew all the words, sang along, and Leslie's got a pretty fair voice. There were a few times she had the opportunity to see it live. She would take one of her girlfriends, somebody she knew would genuinely enjoy herself. I think she thought if I ever agreed to go, it would be to placate her. Which, you know, she wasn't entirely wrong. Since the divorce, though, every now and then I'll hear the one song, 'Don't Cry For Me, Argentina,' runs through my head, and it'll just bring me down. There was a time when I'd never heard of the song, much less the musical. Six years later and it's like I can't get away from it."

Jane looked at Adam. In the half-light of the hotel room, his eyes looked darker, his face older than in the bright of the concourse. "What if."

"Something like that."

Outside the snow had stopped falling and the plows were being warmed up, but neither of them noticed.

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Adam woke at nine o'clock. It took him a few moments to remember where he was, how he'd gotten there. It didn't really start to gel until he rolled over and saw Jane asleep on the other bed. The events of the evening before drifted back into his head in bits and pieces, the things he said mingling with the things he hadn't. He knew he hadn't thanked her properly for inviting him up to the room, not that he had any idea how to.

He looked down and realized he'd fallen asleep in the complimentary robe he'd put on after the shower. As quietly as he could manage, Adam gathered up his clothes and went into the bathroom to dress. He thought about how to get out of the room without waking or offending Jane. A thank you note, maybe, but that seemed to him like something a one-night stand would do. The best thing was to wait for Jane to wake up. Adam finished dressing, hung the robe on the hook fixed to the back of the bathroom door, and went back out into the room.

Jane was awake. "Hey."

"Hey."

"You been up long?"

"Only a couple minutes. You?"

"Oh, for a while now. I don't really do so well on hotel beds. Too stiff for my tastes."

"May I?" he said, pointing to a space next to her on the bed. She didn't say anything so he sat down. "Listen, Jane, I wanted to thank you—"

"Don't."

Adam opened his mouth to reply, then closed it again.

"You won't let me apologize for taking your seat, I won't let you thank me for the bed."

"You brought me up here because of the seat thing?"

"No," she said. "Well, yeah, that had something to do with it. And it was the right thing to do. But I brought you up here

because—” Here she paused. There wasn't any one reason why, nothing she could put into words. She liked his company. She could talk to him without feeling embarrassed. Jane had told Adam things she didn't dare tell anyone else, things about her relationship with her daughter, how she truly felt about her late ex-husband. It hit her, then, what she liked about him. “I like talking to you,” she said. “And I wanted to keep on talking.”

Adam could see in her face that she'd only told half the truth. “If it makes you feel any better, I haven't told a lot of people about how Leslie and I fell apart either.”

Jane blushed slightly. “I was worried, bringing you up here. A little part of me was afraid you would try something.”

“I thought about it. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't.”

“Why didn't you?”

Adam ran his fingers through what was left of his hair. “Because I like you too much.”

* * *

They walked back down the concourse, toward their gates, side by side. Even above the general murmur of people talking, they could hear the group of young girls playing. “They don't ever tire out, do they?” Adam said.

“I suppose not. It's amazing, though. I don't remember having that much energy when I was that young. I mean, I guess I did. Cynthia did. My parents said I did. But even so—” She stopped and listened to the announcement on the public address system. “Oh God, my plane is boarding.” She sped up, and Adam quickened his pace to match hers.

They covered the last hundred feet to her gate as quick as they could, weaving through the crowd like they were so many potholes. The announcement that all rows were boarding came just as they arrived, and a queue had already formed.

Jane turned toward Adam. “Well,” she said. “This is more abrupt than I would have liked.”

“Yeah, I—” He stopped. He wanted to tell her how much he had enjoyed the night before, how nice it had been to just talk to

someone. He knew he'd said it already, back in the hotel room, but this was a more final moment. Adam adjusted the strap of the carry-on he had slung over his shoulder as Jane fished through her purse for her boarding pass. She found it and straightened up to look at him.

“What do we do now?” Adam asked.

“Promise each other we'll write, we'll call. Not do it,” she said.

Adam nodded. They were busy people with their own jobs, their own lives. Not that there wasn't room for each other, but their front doors were a continent apart. Dating would be problematic under the best of circumstances, but with Adam's travel schedule being what it was, just maintaining contact would be difficult.

Adam pulled a business card out of his wallet and gave it to her. “My home number's on the back. If you ever make it down to Miami, my door is always open.”

Jane pulled a folded-over cocktail napkin out of her pocket. “If you ever come up to Seattle. You know.” She pressed it into his hands. “Well—”

“Well,” he said.

She smiled and turned to join the boarding queue. He headed back across the concourse to his seat. It was empty again.

END

