

AFTERNOONS
WITH
HARVEY
BEAM

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Harvey Beam looks at the boiling tarmac and mentally crosses himself. God only beckons when he is sitting on a plane and only in those tortuous moments before take-off when everything that is about to happen seems hopelessly naive and poorly thought out. It's in these moments, fingers gouged deep into the armrests, that he silently prays a benevolent onlooker not only exists but will also forgive once again the sheer arrogance of humans, of people who think it reasonable to launch two hundred tonnes (he has looked this up) of bent metal and loosening rivets into the sky on the strength of — please — a run-up. A run-up that frankly never feels sufficiently fast or purposeful to impress gravity. The rattling, the swaying, the sheer blind hope of it all — it's as embarrassing as it is terrifying.

Harvey glimpses at his phone — five new messages — and shuts it down. The woman beside him takes his cue, checks her phone is dutifully compliant.

'It probably makes no difference,' Harvey says to her with a shrug. 'If a phone could actually bring down a plane, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be allowed to bring them on.'

He laughs to indicate jocularly rather than the look of someone who has actually given this a lot of thought.

'I mean,' he says, 'I doubt the aviation authorities are counting on human conformity to keep us aloft, ha-ha.'

The woman manages a polite smile and Harvey wills himself to shut up.

Finally the aircraft pulls off another miracle and Harvey hopes the pre-midday flight time doesn't give the hosties any big ideas about parking up the drinks trolley. They are not, he reasons, entitled to make any judgement about what help a person may or may not need to cope with flying, with entrapment, with life. He would very much like a drink, thanks.

He wonders about the messages. One will be from Trudi Rice – shit, all five might be from her, such is the unmitigated relentlessness of the head of HR. She has been riding him for weeks: take the payout, Harvey, fill out the forms, see a counsellor – it's on us. But he doesn't want to leave like this, and nor do his listeners want that for him. *I think I know our listeners a little better than you, Trudi. I think I know human relations a little better than you.*

He had long hoped HR managers would go the way of quality assurance consultants and organisational change facilitators and other such experimental workplace creations fired in the kiln of corporate wankery. But like its equally unproductive cousin, IT Support, HR doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Its 'people people' keep employing each other. Always the last left standing.

Beam is bitter, of course he is. Fuck. No denial on that front. He's also sad and worried and incredibly bloody angry, all of which makes him uncooperative. He didn't even tell Trudi Rice he was flying out, taking his own brand of leave in the midst of his 'official' leave.

Anyway, his father is dying, and for some people – plenty of people, he imagines – that's a big deal.

He thinks about this as the hostie edges toward him, trolley contents rattling down the skinny passage dividing the plane in half. His father. Now dying. Dying in the final sense and not just ambling towards oblivion with no fresh ideas. He thought it would be the liver that would get him, get them all in fact, every last true Beam. Or the bowel. Maybe the kidney. An ill-timed stumble down the stairs in the very early morn.

Something that would help those in the church pews nod with a sense of knowing satisfaction, a little smugness. But it is lung cancer that has Lionel Beam, has him in the grip of something apparently horrid. And he never even smoked.

‘Coffee, sir?’

Harvey attempts to adjust his feet, as though making a decision. But there is no room for either. He says, ‘Are you serving wine?’

‘We can. Yes, that’s fine.’

‘I’ll have a red, thanks.’

‘Of course.’

The air hostess, a tall woman with red hair, a fine spray of freckles and an oddly playful expression, pulls out a heartbreakingly tiny plastic bottle, screws off the cap and passes it to Harvey across the chest of the woman beside him. Yes, he thinks, *both of you, go right ahead and judge me*. But the woman beside him pulls up straight and says, ‘Why not? I guess I’ll have one too.’

‘Bless you,’ he says. ‘No fun drinking alone.’ *Although it is, actually.*

The hostie pulls out another little bottle and Beam hamfists a quip.

‘More solid than liquid, hey?’

The woman half smiles, but Beam isn’t sure she got it.

‘All that plastic? For so little wine. There’s more bottle than wine, mass-wise.’ *Stop.*

He never usually talks like this in public: light and unwieldy. It’s the plane that has him off course, out of character. The plane, the destination, those unheard messages. He looks at his aisle-side companion, serene by comparison. She looks, he decides, like a younger version of that actress who was married to that guy in that early 90s TV show, that comedy, about the self-involved married couple living in New York. *What was it called?*

‘Where are you travelling to?’ he blusters on, and quickly

realises there is no destination beyond the one they're heading to: Shorton. Town of ninety thousand. Regional epicentre of nowhere. Place of his birth, growth and spiritual death.

Helen something.

'I've got four weeks work at the hospital,' she says. 'They're desperate for casual nurses. You?'

'My father died. Is dying.'

She looks at him and quickly drops her eyes to the armrest between them. 'I'm sorry.'

'It's all good. I'm not close to him. Just going to say goodbye, really.'

Helen Hunt. Bam.

'Oh. Well, that's still very sad.'

'It's fine. I mean, yes ... sad.'

'Death calls us all home in the end,' she says, possibly quoting someone, and Beam is not sure whether she means him or his father.

'I also just need a break. So it's as good a time as any.'

He instantly knows this sounds callous, can't undo it. Wants to say, *I'm really not a prick.*

But instead, somehow warming to the heartless theme, he says: 'You don't have to love your family. It's not an obligation. Some families are poisonous and it's just stupid to keep sucking on that teat.'

'I guess so,' she says, looking past him to the tiny frame of clouds scudding by. 'Why do you need a break?'

'I work in radio, talkback, and it's just ... you can't keep doing it. After eighteen years I just woke up and thought, shit, I need to breathe out.'

'Oh, you're Harvey Beam,' she says, suddenly turning around to have a proper look at him. 'I know you.'

He gets the familiar rush. Recognition, warmth, then the quick correction: how does she know me? Which thing? It's not always his career, not anymore. Sometimes it's the ACRA event, sometimes his divorce, sometimes ... he glances out the

plane and focuses on a wing rivet about to lose its mooring.

‘My mum rang you once when you were talking about private schools. She’s a teacher in Auburn. She said you cut her off mid-sentence.’

‘I don’t think so. People think that, that’s what it sounds like, but it’s not like that. There are producers ...’

‘Well, she never rang in again. But plenty of people do, which is the main thing, I guess. I’m Grace.’ And she smiles at him, and Harvey thinks it’s been some time since he saw a real smile up close.

‘Hi Grace. I’m Harvey.’

Dickhead.

‘So how long are you staying for? I mean, how advanced is your dad’s condition?’

‘I don’t know where he’s at. My sisters speak in riddles. I think I’ll just stay a week, maybe ten days.’ *Ten days sounds solid.*

‘My father took three years to die.’

‘Three years. I definitely don’t have three years. I mean, that’s awful.’ *Fuck.*

The hostie is back. *Now we’re talking*, thinks Beam. *Another wine, please.* But she’s here on other business.

‘Harvey Beam. You don’t remember me, do you?’

He looks up at the whirl of hair and lipstick and rouge. No, he doesn’t.

‘Jacinta Gold,’ she says. ‘Shorton High? Same maths class. English too, I think.’

‘Jacinta! God, I’m sorry. It’s been a while.’ *It’ll come, it’ll come.*

‘You took my twin sister to the formal and let her drive home with that idiot footballer. Do you remember that?’

‘Yes. Yes I do.’ He glances at Grace, who quickly shifts her gaze to her tray table. Harvey attempts a laugh. ‘We were all so young,’ he says.

‘So what brings you home?’ Jacinta says. ‘Lose your job?’

‘No, Jacinta,’ Harvey says and takes a long pause to reel in the moral high ground. ‘My father is dying.’

‘I heard you lost your job.’

‘I’m taking a break.’

‘Maybe you could have your old job back at 95.3?’

God, Shorton Radio. ‘I don’t think so,’ he says.

‘But you can’t go back, anyway,’ Jacinta says with a theatrical flick of her fringe. ‘No-one ever really goes back.’

It’s an absurd statement from someone who clearly never left anything in the first place.

‘So you’re still in Shorton, then, Jacinta?’

Grace drains her plastic glass.

‘Yep, why would you leave? It’s the best place to raise kids. We just got a Nando’s, you know. And David Jones. You won’t recognise it. How long since you’ve been back?’

‘About eight years. The high school reunion,’ he says, wincing at something, the light through the silly little window. *Had she been there?*

‘Mad night,’ she says. ‘Mad night.’ Beam barely remembers.

‘Well, I’d better keep going.’ Jacinta opens and shuts the overhead locker for effect. ‘Have to check on First.’

And there’s an odd pause as Jacinta assembles a thought. ‘Shouldn’t you be up there?’ she says, hinting towards the front of the plane.

The seatbelt sign dings back on.

‘Great to see you,’ Harvey says, deciding not to ask her for another wine.

Jacinta looks at Grace and then at Harvey. ‘Good to see you, too, Harvey Beam. Hope the job sitch works out. See you in Shorton!’

Harvey turns to Grace, spots a wry grin pushing at the confines of her mouth. ‘I won’t be surprised if my luggage goes missing,’ he says.

‘Because of her twin sister?’ Grace responds, smoothing the folds of her dress. She turns to him and Beam sees that she has

a lovely nose. So often he is thrown by noses.

‘No,’ he says. ‘Because Shorton people hate people who leave Shorton. It’s an act of treachery.’

‘Well, it *is* beautiful apparently,’ Grace says. ‘I’ve been googling. Lovely beaches, rainforest, gateway to the islands.’

Beam snorts. ‘Gateway to the islands! Bloody long gate. They’re about three hours’ drive away.’

Suddenly he feels ungracious. ‘It is nice,’ he says. ‘But it’s not the town it once was. Now it’s an industrial town with everything that goes with that.’

‘How do you know?’ she says. ‘If you hardly ever go there?’

‘I’m still in touch with people,’ he says, thinking of the fifty or so Shorton folk who are friends with him on Facebook. That’s enough.

Harvey slides his empty bottle into the pocket in front of him, puts the tray up and stares out the window. *This is why people don’t talk on planes. There’s no let-up unless you want to seem rude.* He just wants to look out the window now.

Half an hour later they begin their descent. It’s been a while since he’s looked at Shorton from the air, at its geography rather than its history. It looks like so many regional towns in this state: tin-roofed houses standing their ground at the graph-paper centre, a couple of controversial ‘high-rises’, a winding river clinging to muddy banks, a proper footy ground now with lights, two public pools and thousands of private ones, industry snaking its way around new housing estates, acres of rendered brick, and eventually, on the outskirts, pushed to limitless boundaries, the town’s *raison d’être* – wheat. Sugarcane. Wine. Beef. Whatever. Pick your town.

But this was his town. And he can still see charm here through the portal window. Charm and memories. The things we are given before we can choose otherwise and compare. He can see these things but doesn’t feel them, not anymore. Shorton is just a place, a landmark on his timeline, and he won’t be drawn into wistful discussions about the way hometowns

shape you, hold you and ultimately pull you back. *No-one ever really goes back.*

Everything seems more peaceful from the air, Beam thinks, as Grace reaches for the inflight magazine.

His luggage does not arrive.