

14-B

by Jessie Campbell

As I clambered onto the airplane, faces leered at me from every angle. A flight attendant's smile, a ghost of glitter on her pinkish lips, was plastered on beneath mirthless eyes. A few passengers had paused in the narrow aisle in front of me to wrestle their luggage into the compartments above their seats. I stepped on someone's foot, and the person just ahead of me glared.

All I wanted was to disappear. My knuckles were white as I clutched the slim leather portfolio close to my chest. The papers inside, three slightly wrinkled sheets, were, for me, heavier than the small black bag slung over my shoulder. I wanted them to disappear, too.

I peered over the shoulder of the person before me to try to see where I would be sitting. There it was: an emergency exit row. Fourteen-C, the aisle seat right above the wing. If everyone died in some horrible crash, it would somehow be my fault.

The person in front of me finally took his seat, and I moved with trepidation down the aisle to 14-C, wondering who would sit next to me, trying to make phony small talk or tell me a whole life story. No one was there yet. A fat man with more than a five-o'clock shadow sat in the window seat, his head lolled onto the window. He was already asleep. I stowed my luggage quickly, aware of muttering and false coughing behind me, and sat down. I tucked in my elbows and folded my hands in my lap atop the portfolio. I stared at it until its color melted into my clothes, one solid black blur.

I became aware of someone standing in the aisle—again, impatiently. “I’m sorry,” I muttered, snatching up my portfolio and standing. “Are you trying to get in?”

She nodded. Her businesslike bob bounced slightly, a flexible frame for her meticulously made-up face. It was a forgettable face, to be sure. Neither ugly nor beautiful, she looked like any one of a

million American women. She could have been headed anywhere, but at that moment, she wanted to go to 14-B.

I let her in and sat back down, again laying the portfolio on my lap. We buckled ourselves in. The flight attendants began their speech. "Good afternoon," one of them chirped brightly over the tinny intercom. "Welcome to Flight 102, nonstop to..."

I let her fade out. It's an accepted rule that when they drone on about safety belts as if no one has been in a car in the last thirty years, you don't have to listen. The woman sitting in 14-B seemed to be daydreaming, too. The plane taxied aimlessly around for a while, and, after a brief rumbling and shaking, we were in the air.

After the captain's completely hollow announcement of the plane's itinerary, the attendants came around to pass out soft drinks and tiny bags of peanuts. I could no longer avoid the woman sitting in 14-B. She had opened her mouth several times, ready to begin the tiresome drone of plane-talk. Seeing my reluctance to speak, she had remained silent. But now, as I moodily popped peanuts into my mouth, I could hardly feign preoccupation any longer.

"Going home?" she asked finally.

"No," I said. "You?"

"Oh, no," she said. "Bad business."

I glanced at her. All in black, like me, she had managed somehow to cross her legs in the space between 14-B and the seat in front of her. She looked extravagantly unconcerned. "What do you do?" I asked, resigning myself to conversation. At least she was a little interesting.

"Layoffs," she said dully. "Downsizing, you know."

I gave her a hint of a grin. "Mortician, eh?"

She only smiled.

The portfolio shifted in my lap. I hated it, sitting there. "At least you see people on their way to heaven," I said, keeping up my little game.

"No heaven," she said, her monotone neither brisk nor emotional. "Just death, then the worms."

I nodded. "Maybe," I said. "Maybe nothing matters. Life is life and you've got to live it so you can die." The plane shook a little, and I wondered if I would need to use the emergency exit door under the sleeping fat man. Should I have listened to the flight attendants? I found myself amused by the idea of an exit out of a burning plane at thirty thousand feet.

14-B glanced at my portfolio. "Artist?" she asked, sipping her soda. Red lipstick smudged her plastic cup.

"No," I said. "Mortician."

The joke was apparently no longer funny. "What's in it?" she asked.

How was that any business of hers? "A comic strip," I lied. "Who do you lay off?"

She tapped her long fingernails on the armrest between us. "I have a list," she said simply. "No one gets off the list."

"Doesn't sound very pleasant," I muttered. The plane jolted again. "Did they say there would be turbulence?" I asked, my stomach lurching.

The woman shrugged airily.

A chime sounded, and the "Fasten Seat Belts" sign came on. The plane jerked again, worse this time, and the portfolio slipped to the floor at 14-B's feet. The first page slipped out just a bit at the top as she picked it up. She delicately pressed it back down, leaving only "Eulogy" still hanging out, smirking up at me.

"Ah," she said, handing it gingerly back to me. "I'm sorry for your loss."

I grunted. "Thanks." Like it mattered.

"Did you write it?" she asked.

I shuffled the three papers back into place. "Do you write your layoff list?" I said.

"Actually," she said with a smile, "yes."

The plane shuddered. The faces around us had gone pale. Even the flight attendants' fake grins looked skeletal, not at all reassuring. A few children wailed. 14-B was the only one who didn't look at all affected. She had pulled out some lip gloss and was

applying it serenely, despite the ever more violent jolts of the plane.

I closed my eyes. Soon I would be on the ground again, away from the woman sitting in 14-B, away from this strange collection of people. In the church, before the gathering of black-clad mourners, reading those terrible three pages in my lap. In a bar, sweating and breathing tequila fire. Anywhere, as long as it was off this plane.

The captain came on, making apologies and telling the passengers to please remain seated and don't panic.

I had to keep my mind off the tumult of the plane; I tried to force conversation again as the plane rocked back and forth. "So," I said, squeezing the armrest and willing the plane to stop, my eyes still shut tight, "who's on your list?"

The woman patted my arm. "You are," she said.

I opened my eyes and twisted around to look at her. "What did—?"

No one was sitting in 14-B. My eyes widened as the oxygen masks rained down from the compartments above the seats. The captain came on again, but I didn't hear him.

