

SEATMATES

“*You* need to talk with her teacher,” Janet’s agitated voice grated Mark’s mind like a persistent cough irritates the throat. Caitlin, their only child, was having trouble in kindergarten. He wondered if the couple’s struggle was the cause.

He stood close to the plate glass window looking out over the tarmac at San Francisco International, cell phone by his ear, his wife’s caustic voice burning the edges of his self-esteem once again. His breath fogged up the glass with each exhale and he marked an X in the rapidly evaporating spot with his index finger. He was returning home from a consulting gig with Alameda County on a weekday in January. Gray clouds blanketed the late afternoon sky and the wind blew a cap off a worker loading bags from a conveyor belt onto a baggage truck.

“Why does it need to be *me*?” Anger boiled inside him. “I’m the one working fulltime. Before I started this job we agreed that you’d be the point person for school.”

“But her teacher will listen to *you* because you’re a *man*.”

Her tendency toward anger and his toward patience had worn deep grooves in their relationship. *Too deep to crawl out of*, he thought. *No way out*.

“I’ll be back tonight. Why don’t you set up an appointment for us both after school one day next week?”

Not bothering to answer his question she asked, “Why do you have to travel so much?”

She swatted away every positive suggestion he offered like flies at a picnic. Before Mark could answer she jumped back in.

“You’re going to say it’s how you support our family, aren’t you?”

He sighed and closed his eyes.

“We’ve been over this a million times,” he said in a forced calm voice. “My flight’s on time. I should be home by 1:00 a.m.”

“Maybe you should just stay in California,” she yelled. “You love your clients more than you do me!”

Mark pictured Janet as a stick of dynamite, fuse spewing sparks, quickly nearing the end.

“I’ll see you soon,” he said dejectedly.

He touched the red hang-up icon and watched the ground crew guide an American Airlines 747 into parking position. *Same shit, again. Always.* He tried to keep it out of his mind when he was working. Nobody wanted a consultant who was down in the dumps.

Mark and Janet had been faithfully married since college, but he wanted calm and predictability and she lived in a constant state of chaos. They'd tried couple's counseling several times, but the ending was always the same: she grew to distrust the counselor and called it quits. Their relationship was a nonstop crisis. He wasn't sure he could keep it up much longer. It drained energy from him like a hole in the bottom of a water bucket.

Trying to put the troubling phone conversation out of his mind, Mark sat alone in the gate area, working on a note and poem that had been dancing around in his mind. It was for his young daughter.

Dear Caitlin, Thank you for your card. I read it as soon as I got on the plane last week. Here's a poem for you for waiting so patiently for me to come home.

When I'm away from home and I'm missing you, I picture you in the swing and we're playing high, higher, highest ...

"American 3415 to Dallas/Fort Worth — Gate 17," an over-amplified female voice echoed through the mostly empty concourse. "Now boarding all rows."

Mark waited till the other passengers had entered the gate then scanned his boarding pass while the agent offered a pretend smile. He walked slowly down the jetway counting the grooves in the black rubber floor from left to right. He traveled about once a month — six or seven days away each time. National consulting had its downside, but the money was good. And the money was the point: to support his family. His overworked mind returned to the poem for Caitlin. Writing was his best escape, precious minutes of peace away from the impasse at home and the constant toil of work and travel, another world.



Let's see... 21D, 21D... aisle seat, good. Hope I'm not next to some fat guy.

Mark sidestepped down the aisle, black leather briefcase and overcoat in hand.

Even an old fart with bad breath like my high school history teacher would be better than a fat guy.

His mental grumblings continued.

Nothing worse than sitting squeezed to one side while someone else spills over into my minimal, rented space. There. Row 21. Good. Writing materials in seatback pocket. Briefcase and coat overhead. No one in middle seat yet.

Whoa! Long tight blue jeans and cowboy boots in the window seat. A Fort Worth cowgirl, I'll bet.

Mark's seatmate wore designer jeans, expensive alligator boots, and a sleeveless brown leather vest over an olive green shirt. Her auburn hair, carefully braided, caught his eye. *Mid-twenties*, he guessed. Her arms were wrapped tightly across her vest; her face turned toward the blurred gray world outside the small window. She was at least a thousand miles away.

When the flight attendant announced the doors would be closing, the middle seat between them was still empty and so was the row across and the one in front. *A quiet flight with room to stretch out*, he mused, as he began to relax for the three-and-a-half-hour journey home.



Mark pulled out his paper and pen and resumed work on the poem for his daughter. Soon he was in a place where there was no up or down, where airplane and human sounds were distorted and meaningless. The words, thoughts and feelings were all that mattered. When he reached the end of a revision, he glanced over discretely. His seatmate looked straight ahead, arms still crossed, but the feeling of distance around her had diminished. The seatbelt hugged her trim waist and he wondered if she was a runner like himself.

The pilot's voice suddenly blared from the speakers, "We've reached our cruising altitude of 36,000 feet and I've turned off the seatbelt sign. Please remember to keep your seatbelt fastened when seated."

Mark unbuckled, stood up and opened the overhead compartment. Between his raised arms he noticed his seatmate's tanned skin, delicate nose and pink lips. A wave of sexual energy rushed through his core and the tips of his ears tingled. He took a book from his briefcase and, as he reseated, he happened to make eye contact with her. An impulsive smile appeared on her lips for an instant and her green eyes drew him in. She was drop-dead gorgeous.

After Mark sat back down, he took a deep breath to calm his heart, leaned slightly toward her with a comfortable Southern gentleman's smile and said, "Hi, I'm Mark, how's it going?"

She uncrossed her arms and turned her head toward him. "It's going okay, I guess. My name is Alexis." She pulled the in-flight magazine out of the seat pocket.

He loosened his tie and pressed his feet on the bracket under the seat in front to stretch. "Going home?"

"Yep, going home." She shrugged. "You?"

Something bumped Mark's left elbow hard.

"Ouch!"

The serving cart brushed by his arm and a twenty-something male flight attendant stood with his hands on the overhead compartment giving his most charming smile to Alexis.

"What can I get for you, Miss?"

She smiled momentarily. "Red wine would be nice."

"Make that ..." Mark held up two fingers. "Thanks."

The attendant served their drinks and continued down the aisle.

"Yes. I'm going home," Mark said. "Just finished with a client. I live in University Park."

"Oh, that's a nice area!" she said. "What type of work do you do?"

"Consulting with urban counties on how they spend their infrastructure dollars."

Alexis smiled. “I would like to say – that sounds interesting – but it doesn’t.”

“You’re right, it’s not that interesting.” He sipped his wine. “But it pays well.”
Another sip. *Better to be honest than put on an act.*

She took a big swallow from her wine. “I’m coming back from a month in Argentina.”

“Vacation?”

She frowned. “It was supposed to be.”

“Not a vacation,” he said, shaking his head sympathetically.

“Not really.” She touched her forehead with the palm of her hand. “I was hoping to leave my troubles behind.”

He turned a bit more toward her. “What happened?”

“I got a call from my cousin when I arrived in Buenos Aires. She told me that James had been having an affair with my best friend.”

She hit the wine again. He took another sip too.

“And who is James?”

“Former boyfriend!” she said forcefully. “Asshole!” Her face flushed at the sound of her own words. “For a whole year! They’ve been doing it for a friggin’ year!”

“Ouch!” He grimaced.

“Yeah. Tell me about it. We were together ...” She paused and opened both hands. “He lived with me for a couple of years. Five weeks ago he took \$8,000 and my classic Corvette and disappeared.”

Mark nodded.

She patted the seat between them. “It would be easier for us to talk if you sit here.” Their shoulders touched lightly as Mark got the middle seatbelt buckled.

Mark was twenty-eight and he had a wife and daughter at home.

Alexis was twenty-five. She had no one. Her month-long trip had been another failed attempt to find herself in the debris of broken relationships. If anything she was farther away from love than ever.

Their shoulders brushed again. Her vulnerability aroused Mark's desire and he hoped that her buried smile would come out to stay. He imagined taking her face in his hands and kissing her enticing lips.

The twenty-something flight attendant walked quickly down the aisle heading for the rear of the plane. Mark looked up and their eyes met for a second. The attendant flashed a I-know-what-you're-up-to smile and passed by. *Mind your own damned business*, Mark thought as his jaw muscles tightened instinctively.

"What about your parents?" Mark asked.

"Dad gave me everything." Her voice softened and turned somber. "Fine clothes, the best schools ... all the things money could buy. He bought me an American quarter horse when I was ten." Her voice turned angry. "But he never came to a single show!"

Mark was surprised at the suddenness of her anger.

"He always promised me he'd come," she continued. "But then he'd go out of town. Just jump in his plane and fly to Oklahoma City, Houston, San Antonio. He had customers all over the Southwest. The other girls' parents always came to the shows. It was a big deal."

Mark nodded again.

"I may as well have not had a father; 'cause he was never really there for me." She wept softly. He patted the back of her hand and they sat in silence for a minute.

"And then Gabriella ..." She broke down in tears.

Mark sat quietly and in a minute she calmed.

"Is Gabriella your mother?"

"My nanny ..." Her voice broke. "She truly loved me."

"Where is she?"

Alexis looked in Mark's eyes and tears ran down her face.

“When I was fourteen she got ovarian cancer and died. Three months. It was that fast.” Alexis leaned forward and put both hands to her face.

Her sorrow penetrated Mark’s heart and he barely held back his own tears. Suddenly he felt cold and weary. Her story cracked open the vault inside him — the place that was stuffed with sadness; sadness he never shared with anyone. He was always alert for the next tirade at home. It was a mistake, he’d learned, to believe that things between him and Janet were truly at peace or would ever be.

In a minute he patted her shoulder and she leaned back against her seat. She unbuttoned her vest and the long tassels dangled free. They both sipped wine.

“Where’s your mom?” he resumed in a soft voice.

“She left us when I was five.” Alexis shifted in her seat and dabbed a tissue around her eyes. “I haven’t seen her since. Don’t remember much about her, actually.”

The wine had peeled off a thin layer of inhibition for both of them.

“Any brothers or sisters?”

She shook her head. “Only child. And I don’t think I was on purpose.”

Mark finished his wine and propped the glass in the empty aisle seat.

She continued. “I had a lot of friends in high school, I thought. But when I went away to college we lost touch.”

“Where’d you go?” He wanted to move them to a lighter level.

“USC.”

“Ah, the Trojans. Cardinal and gold.”

“Yeah. I majored in theatre ... acting. Had some great teachers. Hollywood actors, some of them.”

He looked at her face. She blushed and held the end of one of her braids under her nose like a mustache. He laughed out loud.

“I played the part of the rich Texas girl.” She looked down at her empty glass.

“You don’t look too happy about that.”

“It wasn’t me they liked; it was the money ... the Corvette ... the parties.”

“You must have made some friends.”

“Lots of friends, but no real friends, if you know what I mean. It was all for the good times, nothing deep. Nothing lasting.” She sighed.

“Did you meet James at college?”

“No. He was one of my boyfriends in high school, junior year. We sort of re-met after USC, two years ago. He stayed home and went to SMU, played baseball. He wanted to go pro, but he ruined his pitching shoulder in college.”

“So you two re-met and then what?” Mark put his hand to his chin.

“We partied mostly. Had fun. And then he moved in with me.” She frowned.

“Ah. Sounds like that’s when the trouble began.”

“Yeah. He drank all the time! Partied all night. I knew he was a party boy, but I didn’t know it was 24/7! And now I know he was messing around on me.”

Mark nodded.

“Shouldn’t ever trust anybody! All they do is hurt you in the end.”

Mark took a deep breath and said, “So you’ve never really been loved for who you are.”

Alexis looked him in the eyes and then blurted, “Not since Gabriella ...” She rolled her lower lip in. Tears ran down both cheeks and dripped on her green shirt.

“It’s hard,” he said softly, touching her shoulder again.

The constant whoosh of the plane piercing the sky at 550 miles per hour muffled the sounds of her sorrow. The words of a favorite blues song drifted through Mark’s mind:

It's the bluest blues

And it cuts me like a knife

It's the bluest blues

Since you walked out of my life.

She touched the back of his hand. “Thank you for listening.” The corners of her mouth turned up for an instant. “You’re sweet.”



The two no-longer-strangers sat quietly for a while as their emotions settled, and then the flight attendant paused at their row again.

Mr. Twenty-something smiled at Alexis and said, “Would you like more wine?”

She looked at Mark, then back at the attendant, and flipped her braids over her shoulders.

“Yes,” she said. “Red. For both of us.”

“You’re married, right?” Alexis asked Mark, after the drinks had been served.

“Yes.”

“I noticed your ring when you were writing on your note pad.”

“I thought you were off far away in another place.”

“Was it that obvious?”

“Yes,” he grinned.

“How long have you been married?”

“Six years.” His voice sounded tired.

“Six *long* years?” she asked.

“Is it that obvious?” He raised his eyebrows and she laughed. “We met in college and it was fire and ice from the beginning.”

“Tell me about the fire,” she said playfully. He was ensnared by her soulful, green eyes and animated manner.

“We were attracted like two magnets.” He held up both his palms and brought them together in a slap.

“Sounds fast.” She paused. “And dangerous!”

He chuckled. “That’s quite accurate. The more time we spent together, the more it felt like two lost puzzle pieces fitting together. I forgot about two other women I was interested in.”

“So when did the ice part start?”

He took a sip of wine and thought.

“We got into these long arguments that turned this way and then veered off in another direction.” He moved his hands wildly in the air. “And we forgot where we started but neither of us could stop. It was like an inside death spiral, you know, like in ice-skating?”

“Yeah. I know.” She nodded. “So why’d you two get married if you already knew the downside?”

He looked in her eyes and hesitated a few seconds before responding. “Why does anyone get married?”

“Oh yeah ... the fire.”

“Right. We were deeply in love, we thought. We were halfway through senior year, decisions needed to be made, and one thing led to another ...” His voice trailed off.

“Ever light fires with anyone else? I mean since you’ve been married?”

“No.” He shrugged. “But I’ve been tempted.” He looked at her lips.

“So what’s it like now?” Her tender voice led him along.

The years-long struggle of his marriage overflowed — emotions he’d not shared with anyone. When he’d finished his story, a few minutes of silence passed and then Alexis said slowly, “So you live in a constant state of anxiety.” Her voice trembled as the words poured out.

It was as if an arrow pierced the center of his heart. The naked truth of the moment sent chills through Mark’s body and he nodded. She turned toward him, and her knee just touched his thigh. He swallowed the last of his second glass of wine, leaned his head back and closed his eyes. The wine tingled his jaws and a strange, warm feeling came over him. He felt accepted and safe for the first time in a long while.

Alexis finished her wine and took the empty glass from his hand.

“What were you writing earlier?” she whispered close to his ear.

“A poem for Caitlin. She’s five.”

“Does she like your poems?”

“Yes.” He sounded satisfied. “We have this little game. She puts a card in my briefcase before I leave for a business trip and I’m not allowed to read it until I’m on the plane. Her mother helps her write the note. And I bring her a poem each time I come home ... and slip it under her pillow.”

“Like the tooth fairy. That’s sweet!” She pointed to his tablet in the seatback pocket. “Will you read it for me?”

Mark swallowed hard, swimming in turbulent emotions: the years-long struggle to make peace with his perpetually unhappy wife ... the magical connection with his dear daughter who was able to love both her father and mother in spite of the conflict ... and now, the surprising and powerful attraction to Alexis.

He looked at her lovely face and dared to explore her inviting eyes. He forgot about the stress that hounded him constantly and all the other things that caused him grief. Their surprisingly intimate encounter had him asking questions he never thought he would entertain. *Is it time to start anew?* he wondered. *Can I trust her?* Then the even more important question — *Can I trust myself?*

“Okay, I’ll read it,” he said, “but it’s not finished yet. It’s very personal and I’ll probably cry.”

The steady, powerful whistling of the jet engines filled his head. He pulled the tablet from the pocket on the back of the seat in front of him and held it in his hands, shaking slightly. Taking his time, he read the lines that expressed the depths of his love for his young daughter and his commitment to her emerging life.

Tears flowed down his face and he could not bear to look at Alexis when he finished. He pressed the seatback button, closed his eyes, and leaned back as far as the seat would go. Alexis pushed her seat back too. He felt her head on his shoulder and her warm breath on his neck. The silence belonged to them both.

He wanted to pull her face to his and kiss her lips full and deep and not stop. It was a singular moment in the time of his life when all that was past, the good, the bad ... everything before, was spun far away into the expanse of space. At that moment all that

mattered was the marvelous present. *It would be so easy*, he thought. *A romantic escape.* Eager lips would meet tenderly, and the wonderful edge of new love breached. Alexis was as enticing and as ready as a woman can be, and he was equally vulnerable. *She could love me for who I am*, he thought, and he wanted all of her for himself.

Alexis took Mark's hand and pulled it over to her lap. He opened his eyes and noticed that she taken off her leather vest and tucked in the seatback pocket. The outline of her bra showed through her green button up shirt.

He watched as she touched the tip of her thumb to his thumb, then her index finger to his, and kept on till all ten fingertips were touching end to end. She pressed harder and he pressed back. Then she slipped her fingers between his and squeezed them together. The intimate connection between their minds and hands was absolute.

She turned her face toward him and asked, "What are you thinking about?"

"Kissing you," he said softly.

She looked in his eyes. "What are you waiting for?"

Mark took her face in both hands and she closed her eyes as he pulled their faces together. Their lips touched tenderly once and then he held her face back a few inches. She opened her eyes and they locked onto his. They kissed again, more forcefully; the taste of red wine like cherries and chocolate mingled on their tongues. Mark wrapped both arms around her. He felt her breath on his neck and was overcome with warmth. He inhaled the scent of her hair and felt himself sliding into a wonderful, passionate space; a place of vulnerability where yes meant yes and there was no room for doubt.

In a few minutes Alexis began talking softly near his ear. "I have a house by a lake where I live alone."

He swallowed hard.

"Why don't you come share it with me tonight?"

She squeezed his arm.

"It has a marble fireplace and a bearskin rug," she whispered into his ear, sending shivers down his spine. "We could start a fire, have warm food and fine wine."

“Sounds perfect,” his words slipped out. He pictured the two of them sitting close to a blazing fireplace, the rug touching his bare legs, Alexis naked beside him, her unveiled skin dancing in the flickering firelight. “Perfect.”

“I have a big waterbed.” She nibbled his ear lobe. “Much too big for one.”

Mark closed his eyes and envisioned a new beginning. Alexis would call his name and he’d wrap his arms around her and pull her in till there was no space in between. He imagined filling her completely and becoming as one. How incredibly freeing and effortless it would be to toss his life into the darkness of space and slip into the marvelous white heat of new love.

Alexis kept coming on. She whispered about kissing, about the warmth throbbing under her shirt, and things she’d like them to do together.

“I want you to feel my heart.” She pressed and held his hand over her chest.

Everything she said sounded exquisite and her touch made him hot. She saw right down to the marrow of his bones.

Yes, I’d love to love you, now and forever, he thought. We could both start over. We’ll share everything from this night forward!

“Will you come home with me tonight?” she asked again.

Mark and Alexis, wholly unknown to each other two hours earlier, were melting in a swirling pot of sensuality. Had they been alone at that moment, surely they would have taken each other fully.

He thought of his daughter and the poem he was writing for her. The longing in his heart for Alexis was pulsing and he could not speak. Sometimes silence says all there is to say.

“Come home with me,” she whispered.

A minute passed before Mark answered. “You are so lovely Alexis ... and trusting ... and I’m so glad we’ve met. The way we’ve listened to each other tonight is amazing ... enchanting.”

“That’s how I feel too,” she said eagerly.

“Part of me would like nothing better than to come home with you tonight. Under different circumstances we might be perfect for each other, but ...”

“But what?” she said forcefully, and her eyes widened.

“We can’t be using each other to escape our own problems.”

Anguish filled Mark’s heart the instant he’d finished his sentence. *Have I made a mistake? Are we meant to be together?* But it was too late for these questions. His words were irretrievable.

Disappointment filled her eyes, followed by a flare of anger and she bit her lip. Alexis let go of his hand and turned back straight in her seat. A minute later she drew her arms close across her chest and turned toward the window again and the darkness outside. No longer could he see her alluring face and the eyes that just moments before drew him entirely inside her; eyes that held wonderful promise and desire. Soon miles replaced the inches between them, and she was alone again in her far-away place.

Mark closed his eyes. The bubbling concoction of love, sadness, commitment, and the temptation of escape swirled through his body and mind. In a few minutes the powerful brew of emotions settled, the poem for Caitlin came to mind, and a sense of peace emerged.

Alexis was frozen in place, her braided hair presenting, but her face still turned toward the window. Her arms were no longer crossed, and Mark watched her chest move slowly out and in with her breathing. *I hope she understands.*



When the pilot announced that the plane would be landing soon, Mark knew it was time. He reached over and took Alexis’ hand in his. She did not pull away. Then he leaned over and whispered near her ear.

“Caitlin needs my love. She is a part of me. The best part of me.”

Alexis squeezed his hand and looked at him, her eyes still wet.

“I’m going home to love and guide her as a father should. And I’ll try to get Janet into couple’s counseling again.” He sighed. “I hope you’ll go to your father and insist that he give you the love you need and deserve. Show him how to love you. And remember always that on this day we shared the rarest of gifts that people can share – our souls.”

He kissed her forehead and sat back. She turned toward him, and an appreciative smile traveled gradually all the way from her far-away place to her face. Then she leaned on his shoulder, this time more like a daughter than a lover-to-be.

A few minutes passed and then a loud bang came from below — the sound of the landing gear flaps opening — interrupting their peacefulness and signaling the end of their magical moment in time.

They sat in silence until the plane taxied to the gate. Mark followed her down the aisle and up the gateway. They walked together to baggage claim and then to the pick-up area. When her taxi arrived, Alexis kissed him on the cheek.

“You’re a lovely man and a good listener. Caitlin is lucky to have you.” She smiled. “I’m glad we were seatmates.”

“Thank you, Alexis.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “My hope for us both is that we find trust and love.”

Mark closed the door for her. As her taxi sped away, he turned and took the next step toward home.