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“Since death is certain, but the time of death is uncertain, what is the most important thing?” — PEMA CHÖDRÖN

June 12, 2013

7:45 A.M.

Newark Airport is shiny from a recent renovation. There are potted plants at each joint of the security line, to keep passengers from realizing how long they’ll have to wait. People prop themselves against walls or sit on suitcases. They all woke up before dawn; they exhale loudly, sputtering with exhaustion.

When the Adler family reaches the front of the line, they load their computers and shoes into trays. Bruce Adler removes his belt, rolls it up, and slots it neatly beside his brown loafers in a gray plastic bin. His sons are messier, throwing sneakers on top of laptops and wallets. Laces hang over the side of their shared tray, and Bruce can’t stop himself from tucking the loose strands inside.

The large rectangular sign beside them reads: *All wallets, keys, phones, jewelry, electronic devices, computers, tablets, metal objects, shoes, belts, and food must go into the security bins. All drink and contraband must be thrown away.*

Bruce and Jane Adler flank their twelve-year-old son, Eddie, as they approach the screening machine. Their fifteen-year-old son, Jordan, hangs back until his family has gone through.

Jordan says to the officer manning the machine: “I want to opt out.”

The officer gives him a look. “What’d you say?”

The boy shoves his hands in his pockets and says, “I want to opt out of going through the machine.”

The officer yells, apparently to the room at large: “We’ve got a male O- P- T!”

“Jordan,” his father says, from the far side of the tunnel. “What are you doing?”

The boy shrugs. “This is a full-body backscatter, Dad. It’s the most dangerous and least effective screening machine on the market. I’ve read about it and I’m not going through it.”

Bruce, who is ten yards away and knows he won’t be allowed to go back through the scanner to join his son, shuts his mouth.

He doesn’t want Jordan to say another word. “Step to the side, kid,” the officer says. “You’re holding up traffic.”

After the boy has complied, the officer says, “Let me tell you, it’s a whole lot easier and more pleasant to go through this machine than to have that guy over there pat you down. Those pat-downs are *thorough*, if you know what I mean.”

The boy pushes hair off his forehead. He’s grown six inches in the last year and is whippet thin. Like his mother and brother, he has curly hair that grows so quickly he can’t keep it in check. His father’s hair is

short and white. The white arrived when Bruce was twenty- seven, the same year Jordan was born. Bruce likes to point at his head and say to his son, *Look what you did to me*. The boy is aware that his father is staring intently at him now, as if trying to deliver good sense through the air.

Jordan says, “There are four reasons I’m not going through this machine. Would you like to hear them?”

The security officer looks amused. He’s not the only one paying attention to the boy now; the passengers around him are all listening.

“Oh God,” Bruce says, under his breath.

Eddie Adler slips his hand into his mother’s, for the first time in at least a year. Watching his parents pack for this move from New York to Los Angeles—*the Grand Upheaval*, his father called it—gave him an upset stomach. He feels his insides grumble now and wonders if there’s a bathroom nearby. He says, “We should have stayed with him.”

“He’ll be okay,” Jane says, as much to herself as to her son. Her husband’s gaze is fixed on Jordan, but she can’t bear to look. Instead, she focuses on the tactile pleasure of her child’s hand in hers. She has missed this. *So much could be solved*, she thinks, *if we simply held hands with each other more often*.

The officer puff s out his chest. “Hit me, kid.”

Jordan raises his fingers, ready to count. “One, I prefer to limit my exposure to radiation. Two, I don’t believe this technology prevents terrorism. Three, I’m grossed out that the government wants to take pictures of my balls. And four”— he takes a breath—“I think the pose the person is forced to take inside the machine—hands up, like they’re being mugged—is designed to make them feel powerless and degraded.”

The TSA agent is no longer smiling. He glances around. He’s not sure if this boy is making a fool of him.

Crispin Cox is in a wheelchair parked nearby, waiting for security to swab his chair for explosives. The old man has been stewing about this. Swab his wheelchair for explosives! If he had any spare breath in his lungs at all, he would refuse. Who do these idiots think they are? Who do they think he is? Isn’t it bad enough that he has to sit in this chair and travel with a nurse? He growls, “Give the boy his goddamn pat- down.”

The old man has been issuing demands for decades and is almost never disobeyed. The tenor of his voice breaks the agent’s indecision like a black belt’s hand through a board. He points Jordan toward another officer, who tells him to spread his legs and stick out his arms. His family watches in dismay as the man moves his hand roughly between the boy’s legs.

“How old are you?” the officer asks, when he pauses to readjust his rubber gloves.

“Fifteen.”

He makes a sour face. “Hardly ever get kids doing this.”

“Who do you get?”

“Hippies, mostly.” He thinks for a moment. “Or people who used to be hippies.”

Jordan has to force his body to be still. The agent is feeling along the waistline of his jeans, and it tickles. “Maybe I’ll be a hippie when I grow up.”

“I’m finished, fifteen,” the man says. “Get out of here.”

Jordan is smiling when he rejoins his family. He takes his sneakers from his brother. “Let’s get going,” Jordan says. “We don’t want to miss our flight.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” Bruce says.

The two boys lead the way down the hall. There are windows in this corridor, and the skyscrapers of New York City are visible in the distance—man-made mountains of steel and glass piercing a blue sky. Jane and Bruce can’t help but locate the spot where the Twin Towers used to be, the same way the tongue finds the hole where a tooth was pulled. Their sons, who were both toddlers when the towers fell, accept the skyline as it is.

“Eddie,” Jordan says, and the two boys exchange a look.

The brothers are able to read each other effortlessly; their parents are often mystified to find that Jordan and Eddie have conducted an entire conversation and come to a decision without words. They’ve always operated as a unit and done everything together. In the last year, though, Jordan has been pulling away. The way he says his brother’s name now means: *I’m still here. I’ll always come back.*

Eddie punches his brother in the arm and runs ahead. Jane walks gingerly. The hand dropped by her younger son tingles at her side.

At the gate, there is more waiting to do. Linda Stollen, a young woman dressed all in white, hurries into a pharmacy. Her palms are sweaty, and her heart thumps like it’s hoping to find a way out. Her flight from Chicago arrived at midnight, and she’d spent the intervening hours on a bench, trying to doze upright, her purse cradled to her chest. She’d booked the cheapest flight possible— hence the detour to Newark— and informed her father on the way to the airport that she would never ask him for money again.

He had guff awed, even slapped his knee, like she’d just told the funniest joke he’d ever heard. She was serious, though. At this moment, she knows two things: One, she will never return to Indiana, and two, she will never ask her father and his third wife for anything, ever again. This is Linda’s second pharmacy visit in twenty-four hours. She reaches into her purse and touches the wrapper of the pregnancy test she bought in South Bend. This time, she chooses a celebrity magazine, a bag of chocolate candies, and a diet soda and carries them to the cashier.

Crispin Cox snores in his wheelchair, his body a gaunt origami of skin and bones. Occasionally, his fingers flutter, like small birds struggling to take flight. His nurse, a middle- aged woman with bushy eyebrows, fi les her fingernails in a seat nearby.

Jane and Bruce sit side by side in blue airport chairs and argue, although no one around them would suspect it. Their faces are unflustered, their voices low. Their sons call this style of parental fight “DEFCON 4,” and it doesn’t worry them. Their parents are sparring, but it’s more about communication than combat. They are reaching out, not striking.

Bruce says, “That was a dangerous situation.”

Jane shakes her head slightly. “Jordan is a kid. They wouldn’t have done anything to him. He was within his rights.”

“You’re being naïve. He was mouthing off, and this country doesn’t take kindly to that, regardless of what the Constitution claims.”

“You taught him to speak up.”

Bruce tightens his lips. He wants to argue, but he can’t. He homeschools the boys and has always emphasized critical thinking in their curriculum. He recalls a recent rant about the importance of not taking rules at face value. *Question everything*, he’d said. *Everything*. He’d spent weeks obsessing over the idiocy of the blowhards at Columbia for denying him tenure because he didn’t go to their cocktail parties. He’d asked the head of the department: *What the hell does boozy repartee have to do with mathematics?* He wants his sons to question blowhards too, but not yet. He should have amended the declaration to: *Question everything, once you’re grown up and in full command of your powers and no longer living at home, so I don’t have to watch and worry*.

“Look at that woman over there,” Jane says. “There are bells sewn into the hem of her skirt. Can you imagine wearing something that makes a jingly sound every time you move?” She shakes her head with what she expects to be mockery, but turns out to be admiration. She imagines walking amid the tinkle of tiny bells. Making music, and drawing attention, with each step. The idea makes her blush. She’s wearing jeans and what she thinks of as her “writing sweater.” She dressed this morning for comfort. What did that woman dress for?

The fear and embarrassment that crackled through Bruce’s body next to the screening machine begins to dissipate. He rubs his temples and offers up a Jewish- atheist prayer of gratitude for the fact that he didn’t develop one of his headaches that make all twenty- two bones in his skull throb. When his doctor asked if he knew what triggered his migraines, Bruce had snorted. The answer was so clear and obvious: his sons. Fatherhood is, for him, one jolt of terror after another. When the boys were babies, Jane used to say that he carried them like live grenades. As far as he’s concerned they were, and still are. The main reason he agreed to move to L.A. is because the movie studio is renting them a house with a yard. Bruce plans to place his grenades within that enclosure, and if they want to go anywhere, they’ll need him to drive them. In New York, they could simply get in the elevator and be gone.

He checks on them now. They’re reading on the far side of the room, as an act of mild independence. His youngest checks on him at the same time. Eddie is a worrier too. They exchange a glance, two different versions of the same face. Bruce forces a wide smile, to try to elicit the same from his son. He feels a sudden longing to see the boy happy.

The woman with the noisy skirt walks between the father and son, cutting off the connection. Her bells chime with each step. She is tall, Filipino, and solidly built. Tiny beads decorate her dark hair. She’s singing to herself. The words are faint, but she drops them around the waiting room like flower petals: *Glory, Grace, Hallelujah, Love.*

A black soldier in uniform is standing by the window, with his back to the room. He’s six foot five and as wide as a chest of drawers. Benjamin Stillman takes up space even in a room with plenty to spare. He’s

listening to the singer; the woman's voice reminds him of his grandmother. He knows that, like the screening machine, his grandmother will see through him the minute she lays eyes on him at LAX. She'll see what happened during the fight with Gavin; she'll see the bullet that punctured his side two weeks later, and the colostomy bag that blocks that hole now. In front of her—even though Benjamin is trained at subterfuge and has spent his entire life hiding truths from everyone, including himself—the game will be up. Right now, though, he finds peace in the fragments of a song.

An airline employee sashays to the mouth of the waiting room with a microphone. She stands with her hips pushed to one side. The uniform looks either baggy or too tight on the other gate agents, but hers fits as if it were custom made. Her hair is smoothed back into a neat bun, and her lipstick is shiny and red.

Mark Lassio, who has been texting instructions to his associate, looks up. He is thirty- two and has had two profiles written on him in *Forbes* magazine during the last three years. He has a hard chin, blue eyes that have mastered the art of the glare, and short gelled hair. His suit is matte gray, a color that looks understated yet expensive. Mark sizes up the woman and feels his brain begin to turn like a paddle wheel, spinning off last night's whiskey sours. He straightens in his chair and gives her his full attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," she says, "welcome to Flight 2977 to Los Angeles. We are ready to board."