

## *Takeoff*

My suitcase kept setting off an alarm as it passed through the machine. He stared at me, as if it was my fault.

*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

The noise was loud, causing people to look at the baggage scanner in the airport with concern. I had never heard this type of alarm come from a machine like this before. I was surprised that there weren't red flashing lights to go with it. TSA usually just scanned the bag, and sometimes—but rarely—took the bag aside, opening it up to make sure there was nothing illegal (too many ounces of shampoo) in it. But this machine was different. The people in the airport, impatiently waiting, stared at the machine, waiting for the noise to commence. I stared at my bag. And he stared at me, staring at the bag. I was careful not to lift my gaze from the suitcase to his eyes.

There was nothing special on me or in my bag—no weapons, no gold, no shampoo. I promised the TSA worker I had done nothing wrong. She nodded, seeming friendly and understanding, as she examined my suitcase. It felt like she knew I needed someone on my side, someone to care and not yell, someone to laugh at whatever my silly mistake had been and not cause me more pain. The machine still would not stop beeping; it must've been broken or something. It couldn't have been my bag, my fault. Out of the corner of my eye, I could still see him behind me, glaring at me. He seemed so angry, as if I had already ruined his entire day.

She handed me my laptop from my bag, "Next time, just put it in a tray on its own."

"Of course, I'm so sorry," I replied, feeling stupid. I had never forgotten to take my electronics out at the airport; my brain felt like it hadn't been working these last few days.

She half smiled and went on to the next bag she had to examine. I waited for my boyfriend—well I guess now I should call him my fiancé—who was next in line for the metal detectors. He didn't set off any alarms, and neither did his bags. He smiled and thanked the workers as he always did, then quickly took his custom leather duffle and Louis Vuitton shoes from the machine. Grabbing my hand too tightly, digging his nails into my skin, we began walking to our gate.

He didn't say a word as we ran to the gate. We weren't in a rush—we still had 37 minutes until the flight would begin boarding—but I followed his lead. I was always a step or two behind him, as he dragged me and my hand wherever we were going. His legs were twice the size of mine; it was impossible to go the speed he wanted.

Sitting down at the gate, I waited a few minutes for him to finally say something.

"Why the fuck did you leave your computer in your bag?" he asked, as his hand grabbed my leg tightly.

Trying not to cry, or even laugh, I said, "Cat, I didn't mean to, I must've forgotten."

"We could've missed the flight," he replied, staring at me, refusing to blink or move.

I looked at the time on my phone, realizing we had another 33 minutes until the flight would even begin its boarding process.

“I’m sorry,” I said, ending the conversation and his staring contest. He turned toward the window, looking out toward the plane. I knew he was scared of flying, that was one of his secrets that no one else in his life knew. He shared it with me, and only me, trusting me with his biggest fear. I always let him pick where we were going, how long the flight would be, which airline we would take. It was hard to make him happy or calm on travel days, even with this new ring on my finger.

A young woman sat in the seat directly across from Cat. She had short brown-hair and a pair of glasses on; she looked smart, or maybe it was just the glasses, but her eyes looked kind. She stared at Cat, her eyebrows furrowed, lips frowning downward. She looked disappointed, maybe even angry. I wondered if she knew people like Cat in her own life, or if she had been with a man like him before. Her eyes, still staring at Cat’s, made it seem like she had heard the way he talked to me, or noticed how his nails were beginning to dig into my leg. I looked at her, then looked away, scared to make eye contact with someone who understood what was going on.

My eyes darted to my phone as a notification from Kate popped up. She had texted me asking how our trip was; she loved Cat like a brother and couldn’t wait to hear about our adventures.

*Hey best friend, how was your vaca? Was it nice to have some alone time with Cat? <3*

I didn’t know how to reply. The vacation was fine, I guess. Not great? Not horrible? I could tell her that we swam with dolphins, or that we had a delicious wine while watching the sunset. I could tell her that after the sun had gone down, we went back to our hotel room, and he hit me. I could tell her that the next night he raped me, and that the following night he proposed to me on the beach. I could ask her if she thought it was a mistake that I had said yes, or if she thought there was something wrong with him. But I knew I couldn’t tell her any of that—she loved him, just like everyone else. I knew all of our friends would throw us an engagement party when we got back, my mom and dad would be thrilled. When my dad first met Cat when we were still in college, he was a little worried; it was almost like he knew he was trouble. But after meeting him a few more times, he took him under his wing, almost treated him like a son. My parents were waiting for this day to come, waiting to see a ring on my finger.

I typed out what I was going to say to Kate, then deleted it, repeating the same process again and again. I looked at my fiancé, whose body was completely turned away from mine. I couldn’t stop thinking about what he had done to me three nights ago. My mind would not turn off, it replayed it like a scene in a film, over and over again. I wanted to tell Kate how we fought at dinner and that when we got back to our room, he hurt me.

He grabbed my shirt and pushed me on to the cold floor of our hotel room. I stared at his pale skin in the dark as he tore off his clothes, top to bottom, and then mine. On top of me, he pushed my legs apart. I tried to get him off of me, forgetting how much bigger he was.

I begged him, “Cat, baby, can you, sl-slow down?”

He didn’t hear the words I mumbled out—or at least he pretended not to. He pulled my hair hard, then gripped my neck with his fingers, not caring about the mark it would leave.

I felt him against me, enjoying himself. I tried to say *no, stop*, but I could hardly breathe.

Afterward, he told me he loved me and he was sorry. I didn't know if he was apologizing for the fight or for what he had just done to my body.

I looked back at my phone, my fingers had typed all of the events out as they replayed over and over in my mind. I deleted the message, hoping it would erase the memory. I finally hit send, telling Kate nothing.

*It was really fun! Miss you!*

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10A and 10B were our seats on the plane ride home. Cat sat in the aisle, I sat in the middle, and a bigger, snoring man sat at our window. I never liked flying either, but Cat didn't know that and never asked. Once he shared his fear of the sky with me, that was our priority. I thought my discomfort was pretty obvious though—I always took an Ambien right when we got on the plane to make me fall asleep. My left leg never stopped moving, shaking even when the sleeping pill kicked in. And I always asked him if I could sit in the aisle, but he never said yes. He was too tall, he would say, it would hurt his legs too much.

I looked around the plane, waiting for us to take off. It felt like I had been sitting there, in between the two men, for hours, but my phone said it had only been a few minutes. They both already had their eyes closed, arms crossed over their chests; he always tried to fall asleep before the flight started to move, but never could. I grabbed my medicine, taking it quickly with a sip from Cat's water bottle, before he could see.

The brown-haired woman from the airport terminal sat in row 9. She looked over at me with a friendly grin, then looked down at her chair to put her seat-belt on, not giving me enough time to smile back at her. I wondered if she was going home, too, or if she had some fun trip planned. I looked at the people next to her, examining the man to her left and the woman to her right to see if she knew them, but I decided that she was probably flying alone. Good for her.

"Flight attendants, please prepare for takeoff," the captain said over the plane's speaker.

My leg was already bouncing up and down. Cat's eyes were closed, his thumbs fidgeting. He was nervous, scared, but wouldn't say a word to me. I turned my phone to airplane mode and tried to take a deep breath. In and out. I wished that Cat would hold my hand, or kiss my cheek, or even put his hand on my leg nicely—something to help me calm down. He had opened his eyes, not looking at me, and stared at the bright TV screen in front of him. He flipped through the movies, trying to pick one, trying to distract himself.

The wheels of the plane moved underneath my seat. My heart raced as I peered over the man next to me and out the window, as the pavement disappeared and the cars below us began to look like ants. I put my hair up into a bun, feeling beads of sweat drip from my neck and onto my back already. In and out. In and out. My breathing felt deep and loud—how could Cat not hear it? Maybe he did. Maybe he just didn't care.

I closed my eyes, hoping the medicine would kick in and I would fall asleep. I hoped that it would make me forget who I was sitting next to and about the new piece of jewelry he had put on my finger a few days prior, and about what he had done to me the night before that.

In and out. In and out.

I slowly felt myself drifting to sleep, my closed eyelids twitching back and forth, as if they were watching a fight between two people.

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I could still feel the grip of his hand around my waist and his warm breath on my ear. Taking my arm, he led me up the stairs of his house. Bright lights flickered and the beat of the music vibrated throughout my body. My eyes were blurred, blinking every few seconds, and I felt the heat of each person that we brushed by.

“Come on, baby, let’s go upstairs,” he whispered in my ear.

My best friend screamed my name in the stairwell. I tried to turn toward her as he continued to pull me to his room. I responded back to my friend with a small wave, unable to scream anything loud enough for her to hear. It was our first college party and we both said we wanted to go home with guys that night. Kate took my wave as a good sign and returned it with a wink as she humped the air and pointed at the boy grabbing my arm, almost spilling the drink she forgot was in her hand.

I stumbled up the last stairs, afraid of falling over and making a fool of myself in front of the cute boy who now held my hand.

Once we got to the room, I reached for his body in the dark. He turned around to put his hands on my hips, and his lips on mine. The tequila on his tongue from minutes before left a strong taste in my mouth as I tried to pull away.

“We ca-can’t. I’m so fucked right now,” I stuttered.

“We can take our time, Rach. I like you, there’s no rush” he replied.

A swarm of butterflies hit my stomach—he knew my name, he said he *liked* me. His lips were pressed to mine, but I came up for air, unable to not smile.

“Hey, I don’t know your name,” I grinned, lying through my teeth. I knew who he was, everyone knew who he was. He was the captain of our university’s basketball team, the guy who won every sportsmanship and MVP award each year, the guy that everyone loved.

“Catano, everyone calls me by my last name,” he put his hand on my face, smiling back at me.

“I’ll call you Cat,” I laughed, feeling the alcohol and butterflies rush through my body.

He pushed me on to his bed, never letting our lips part. Unzipping his jeans with one hand, I felt his other hand slide underneath my bra. He then traced his hand up and down the inside of my right thigh. My skin under his touch shivered. He *liked* me. He wanted *me*.

The music from downstairs still blared in both of our ears. We didn’t say any words, just kissed one another, moving our bodies together, as one.

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Cat’s grip tightening on my leg jolted my body awake.

“What?” I shake my head back and forth, confused and interrupted.

Glaring at his face, he looks pissed off and confused by my question. He was so kind that first night, so fun, so into me—what changed? Why would he hurt me like that now and why would I say yes? He removes his hand from my leg, as it continues to shake.

“We landed,” he says.

I nod, looking around the plane, trying to avoid his eyes, knowing they would hurt me. My heart hadn’t stopped racing, my breathing now louder than before. Three hours had passed. The Ambien had knocked me out, making me dream of better moments with him, making me forget what had happened a few nights before.

Cat stared back at the movie screen, trying to finish the last two minutes of the film he picked. He almost looked like he had been crying. Had he been that afraid while flying? Had the film made him emotional? I couldn’t understand.

I stared down at my hands fidgeting in my lap. The diamond on my ring finger was huge, bringing me back to reality and the man in 10A. Flying had always been my biggest fear—*our* biggest fear. Taking off into the air, the sky big and empty, with just a few little planes and clouds. Now I was terrified to come back down to the ground, take on this new chapter with him.

The brown-haired woman in row 9 locked eyes with mine. She looked at me with concern. Could she hear my breathing? Did she see the mark on my neck that I had tried so hard to hide? I couldn’t let Kate notice, or any of our friends, though they probably wouldn’t even believe me. The woman’s eyes went from mine, to the man sat beside me, and then back to mine. I gave her a slight nod, trying to convey to her that I was okay.

I wanted to scream as loud as I possibly could. I wanted to run so fast that his long legs wouldn’t be able to catch me.

The woman slowly and sadly nodded back toward me. Turning away from me, attempting to mind her own business.

I switched my phone off airplane mode and unbuckled my seatbelt, forcing a smile toward Cat. I prayed that our suitcases would arrive safely and quickly at baggage claim, knowing he would blame me if they didn’t. He kissed my cheek, lovingly, as we waited to get off the plane.

My phone screen flashed brightly in my hand; Kate had texted back during our flight.

*I miss you toooo and can’t wait to see you tomorrow and hear about it all!*

I took a deep breath. In and out. And replied.

*I’ll have to show you my new ring, we’re engaged! :)*