

Mark Jarman / CAPTAIN KIRK

I'm stuck in the cheap seats back beside the barking vowels of the engines and I can't hear half of what is said. I have dull nausea and cocktail napkins for earplugs. I'm beside a raven beauty who is journeying to North Carolina. We flirt, tamper mindlessly with the movement of blood from heart to hair. Flaps move on the plane and we move off the map.

"Captain Kirk has turned out the seatbelt lights. . . ."

Passengers snicker, whisper: Captain Kirk, ha ha.

Captain Kirk goes crazy. "You think I don't hear you? God I wish that damn show had never been on." We regret our snickering and turn to the windows for solace. At 33,000 feet the high plains are a thing of beauty, water-worked with scars and depressions, oxbows and crazy twists. We swim over them and I can see a flimsy matchbox town built in an ancient riverbed; what if the big river returns?

We fly through an electrical storm. From the back I watch a glowing wheel roll down the aisle toward me, a ghost's bowling ball, a whirling of lit knives. I'm looking for a parachute, for God.

"Ball lightning," says the calm North Carolina woman, "it happens to me all the time." She feels she may attract this particular phenomenon, as my face attracts sticks.

Years ago I took Billy Smith's goalie stick to my chin: 18 stitches and a piece of wire that won't go away. There wasn't enough skin to close it. I have a sizable screw in my ankle. Now I wait to trigger the more delicate airport alarms.

Our plane stops at the mountain airport. The snowplows are out on the runway. Everyone recalls what happened before with a plane and snowplows at this exact crappy airstrip. A red light flashes on our wing and reflects in a glass an old man holds over his chest, precisely where his heart would be. It is as if I am hallucinating his pulse. The plane jerks to the right and his red heartbeat is gone. We are a line of portholes flung back into black air, over Doukhabor colonies, plane

lurching between sawtooth peaks. I reflect on the plane being made of the same material as beer cans and I reflect on the rows of rock teeth below and beside our alloy skin. There is too much time to think on planes, on buses, lost in the ozone.

Waitress X is leaving in August for journalism school down east. I both dread and want this. I don't know what I want. To touch her blouse. "They're still there," she says. "Now I know what you do," says Waitress X as we hug. "First you grab my ass then you touch me here." I realize we've hit an expiry date of sorts; I've become predictable. I have to stop. It's over. What if she calls me on Tuesday? Say sorry? I don't know that I can. But I know it's over. Waitress X can't pay her rent, is moving back in with her mother to save for school, yet she's always trying to buy me things. I in turn offer her an airplane ticket and can't believe I'm doing it. My cells vibrate after I see her, I forgive all.

"What are we going to do?"

"How come when I finally stop asking that, you start?"

She had a slow night but made \$100 in tips. Her girlfriend Judy said to her, I saw your new boyfriend with his wife. Meaning me. Her friend doesn't approve, doesn't like me and I don't blame her. Her friend Judy says to her, "So it's just sex then." JUST sex? I wonder. Waitress X asks, Can't she smell my perfume? Good question. Isn't it written on my face? I wonder. Can't everyone tell?

Waitress X pilots an old fashioned \$5 bicycle, skirted long legs lifting, Frisson, a basket of fat blackberries and speckled eggs as a gift (breakfast my favorite meal). Her brown hair pulled back. She smiles, we don't really know each other. Her father drank and died in a plane. When young she found a note from her mother to her father, pinned to their pillow. She ran away to the ravine briefly because of what she read, part of which was a sexual slight related to her father's drinking. Will this happen to me? A note? A fax singing through the lines? There was a cave she hid in before returning home the next night. Her mother made her see a psychiatrist. We're necking. I want to run off with her to a cave in Mexico to solve things, to have a happy ending. Her black bra is visible under her loose knit sweater. Laughing, she points this out, "See?" I see. I see that this won't last, that she'll tire of the problems, of sneaking around in the afternoon, and I

could tire of her body I suppose, though it does not seem likely at this moment. It's wilder because we can rarely see each other, but can never just go to a movie, go on a nice date, eat supper at home, laze on the couch. It's "just sex." She picks up every lunch tab, pays for everything, says she pays for all her boyfriends, they're always bums. She finds this somehow amusing about herself. On my birthday she brings more gifts: pepper pat , purple grapes, barbecue chicken, Mumms. I abuse her, call her my plaything, my sex object and she just laughs, says, "You're funny." She has her own wit. Waitress X gives the pack of dogs a good talking to. The dogs snicker at first, then realizing their mistake, they try to look more serious. The waitress' blonde-brown hair streams into a city and lanterns of a metropolis swim under her bare feet. Down the hill we make out pink neon of Babel, of Babylon: Girls Girls Girls, Cold Suds, Karaoke, Ask About Our Famous Deathburger. I have no name for the colour of her eyes. There's a sign on the Team entrance: WINNING STARTS HERE! We lose. Coach shoves the talking heads from our locker room. Get your fat sorry asses...get...and stay away from the damn coffee machine...bunch of freeloaders...wouldn't piss on us if we were on fire...Put that in your column, ya backstabbing dead beats!

I have too many women and am lonesome. I know; I complain no matter what. Another Coincidence Dept.: Their periods are at the same time. Both had a sister die of cancer when they were younger. Neither seem to talk to their surviving sister.

Yet Another Weird Coincidence: The Intended gets a new advertising job right beside Waitress X's apartment building. 30 feet between their doors, between a desk and a bed. What exactly are the odds of this happening in a city of 700,000? I can no longer drop by during the day. Waitress X finds this hilarious.

I didn't ask but am told of the latest opiate of the peoples: Universal, Nautilus, speedwalking, gravity boots, 50 situps a day for a new order. Listen: I have spent the family retainer, the advances, the signing bonus, the salaries, the money from local carpet commercials, from Mr. Plywood ads. I have spent money I don't have, borrowed from family, from women I slept with who hate me now, from dipso players who wanted a drinking buddy. I ran up my Visa, hit the limit five times and they keep raising it like a poker game. 50 situps isn't

going to do it.

Once more I'm planted in the cheap seats, flaps altering their stance as our celestial metal slum crosses Mountain Standard Time, crosses the standard dangerous mountains and doomed bears snoring in sparkling caves. The team plays cards and wears garish ties to denote a road trip. The river below returns as our plane moves off the map again. Under the makeup, under the No Smoking sign, the stewardess sings her weary pantomime and Captain Kirk tells us what we can and cannot get away with in his narrow hurtling kingdom.