

Published in The Lindenwood Review, issue 2, June 2012

STILL IN THE AIR

By Susan Hodara

For the last four hours of our flight from Nice to New York, the man's body lay across the middle seats of the row behind us. The flight attendants had hung red airline blankets along the tops of the seatbacks and tented them over him. They'd wrapped his calves and feet, which extended into the aisle so that passengers had to step over them on their way to and from the restrooms. The man's wife hunkered in the window seat across from him, staring blindly ahead.

It was the end of our family's week-long trip to Provence. My husband, Paul, and our grown daughters, Sofie and Ariel, had attended a wedding, and then driven the serpentine roads of the Alpes-de-Haute-Provence.

On the airplane, we sat just behind the wing. I took the seat by the window next to Paul; Sofie and Ariel were in the row behind us, right before the bathrooms. Shortly after we finished lunch, I looked up to find Paul standing beside our seats talking to a flight attendant. He was offering to help her open the bathroom door nearby, suggesting she use the metal end of a loose seatbelt for better leverage on the emergency release. It was like him to get involved when he spotted something amiss.

"What's going on?" I asked.

He turned toward me and spoke in a lowered voice. "Someone collapsed in there," he said.

“How do you know?”

“His wife got worried when he didn’t come back to his seat. Now he’s on the floor, and they can’t open the door.”

I loosened my seatbelt and twisted around so I could see. There, the wife, on the opposite side of the plane, pacing up and down the aisle. She looked to be around 70, a petite woman with straight auburn hair cut short. She wore khaki pants and a matching shirt. Her face was flushed, her mouth set tight.

I shifted up onto my knees. Paul was edging his way toward the bathroom, where two more attendants had appeared. Sofie and Ariel were watching, their expressions grim. When I swiveled back around, I noticed the man in front of me, immersed in his flickering television screen.

They will manage to open the door, I thought. They will revive the man, help him up, bring him back to his wife. He will sit with her until we land.

But the door was still jammed. I searched for the wife; one of the attendants was leading her back to her seat several rows up. As soon as she sat, Ariel got up, and cutting across the plane through the First Class galley, headed toward her. I watched as she reached over to touch the woman’s shoulder and say something. I turned to Sofie, who stood and followed her sister.

Of the four of us, I alone remained in my seat. I told myself it was best that I stay out of the way, that there was nothing I could do anyway. And while there probably wasn’t, I know now that I was also stung by the horror of what might be.

I remembered a different flight home from a vacation years earlier, when Sofie and Ariel were also sitting behind us. Just before boarding, Ariel had learned that one of

her best friends had been killed in a skiing accident. Her face had gone ashen and she had retreated into herself for the entire journey, her cheek against the window, her eyes closed. Sofie had leaned toward her and stroked her hair while I reached through the space between the seats to hold her hand.

Now I wanted to go to both of them. As I made my way to the other side of the plane, I saw that many of the passengers didn't realize what was happening behind them. Ariel was kneeling backward on the seat in front of the wife so she could face her. Although she wasn't speaking to the woman, she seemed unwilling to leave her. Sofie was standing nearby and I kissed her cheek. The couple was French, she told me. The woman didn't speak English, so a bilingual attendant had been summoned. "Maybe the plane should land," Sofie said, but by now there was only water below. For an instant I thought, I just want to go home, but I pushed the sentiment aside, chiding myself for my selfishness.

By the time I returned to my seat, the passengers in middle of the row nearest the bathroom had been moved, and the pilot had joined the group of attendants. When the door was finally forced opened, he and a male attendant unfolded the man from the stall, one grabbing under his arms, the other taking his feet. There wasn't enough room and the body sagged until someone stepped in to support it. When they lay the man along the empty seats, his shirt was unbuttoned. I could not see his face, but I saw his belly flecked with white hair, a scar from what might have been an appendectomy dipping below his belted pants. His left arm had been shoved by the seatback across his body; his hand rested palm down on his ribs, watch on his wrist, gold wedding ring on his finger.

The attendants were joined by a doctor and nurse aboard the plane, and a young man who informed the crew that he'd just graduated from nursing school. Paul stood at the edge of the group, and much of what was taking place was blocked from my view, but I could see the up and down of the doctor pressing over and over on the man's chest, and the determination of the two nurses trying to assemble a syringe that appeared to be missing a piece. The wife came back down the aisle. "Il est morte, il est morte," she said, until an attendant urged her back to her seat. Whenever Ariel caught my eye from across the plane, I shook my head at her in quick little motions.

After about half an hour, there was some kind of consensus that the intervention should stop. The doctor was sweating. One of the attendants was crying. I looked for the wife, who had returned to her husband. She stood as if frozen, and I mirrored her, immobilized in my seat. I thought of Paul, with his high blood pressure, sitting endlessly at the computer; of Sofie and Ariel, walking alone at night on darkened city streets. Then I banished the images from my mind.

"Look down there," I said to them when they returned to their seats, pale and quiet. I jabbed my finger against the window. "People are dying all the time down there," I told them. "It's a part of life." I'd meant it as some odd form of comfort, but the words did nothing for my own unsettled feelings.

For the rest of the flight, the body's presence filled the plane, and the heavy shadows of loss and fragility pressed down around us, but I still couldn't find my emotions. Sofie and Ariel took a couple of seats farther up the aisle so they weren't sitting next to the draped body. Paul and I stayed where we were and read. As we flew

west, we asked for water from the attendant's cart, we stretched our legs and checked our watches.

From time to time I peered back at the man, so I could feel once more the jolt of his death. But what really compelled me was his wife — his widow, I said to myself. I kept turning to look at her — I couldn't stop myself. For awhile a female attendant sat beside her and held her hand; when she left, the woman wrapped herself in an airline blanket, took out her cell phone, then put it back in her purse.

I wanted to study her, watch her for clues. How would she act? What would she do? It wasn't until we landed, and she took out her cell phone again, that I saw her tears. They came quickly, and she wiped them away.

Everyone was asked to remain seated as three Port Authority policemen boarded the plane and stood by the man's body. Then we all shuffled up the aisle and spilled into the airport and back into our lives. For days, when friends asked about our vacation, we launched first into what had happened in the air.

We told them about the man, how he lay there on the seats all the way home, how his wife sat across from him the whole time. But I never spoke about how she chilled me, cocooned and unmoving for all those hours: the embodiment of my darkest fears.